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## 'Bunnies with steel tails?' : an exploration of gender identities within an independent single-sex girls' school

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John Moore

M7222998

‘Bunnies with steel  
tails?’: An exploration  
of gender identities  
within an independent  
single-sex girls’ school

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)

2005

*To Gemma  
for all your support*

*To Mum and Dad  
for everything you have done over the years*

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**ABSTRACT**

This research was carried out in an independent 11-18 girls' school in West London. It explores the way girls construct their gender identities within the single-sex school. The starting point for the research was an interest in the popular perceptions of gender differences in achievement. The girls in this school achieve impressive examination results and the popular debate compared girls' 'success' with boys' 'failure' and 'underachievement.' In order to explain this differential, recent gender research has been much more concerned with boys and masculinities than with girls because it is assumed that girls are *all* doing well. Initially, I adopted a quantitative approach seeking to compare girls, boys and mixed school achievement but with the aim of uncovering the problems in generalising and comparing gender groups. However, the research shifted due to the unrevealing nature of the initial quantitative analysis within the girls' school. It indicated that girls did well regardless of subculture or ethnicity. Much more interesting was the way in which the girls constructed identities within the school and eliciting their voices through semi-structured interviewing became the main research method. My findings suggest that, in some senses, the single-sex school is strongly feminist supporting a 'girls can do anything' ethos where girls can be 'bunnies with steel tails', combining traditional femininities with a masculine desire to compete and succeed. Yet the school also reproduces traditional, accepted ways of being feminine that can limit the range of gender identities a girl can adopt. This is partly due to gendered discourses present in wider society. The school is not free from such knowledges. Girls constructed their gender identities in the midst of these conflicting messages and I wanted to focus on the girls' voices to illuminate both the liberatory and also the limiting aspects of the single-sex school experience, to show the complexities of gender identities construction and to refocus the gender debate back onto girls' experiences. As a teacher at the school, I was an insider but I am also an outsider through my own masculine identity. This dual position was carefully considered during the research as I eventually adopted a qualitative research method that could incorporate this reflexivity. My theoretical perspective draws on the work of Bourdieu who emphasizes reflexivity and examines the structured and structuring nature of individuals and institutions. My view of gender identities is that they are

socially constructed and that gender is performed rather than biologically assigned. Butler's work, particularly her notion of performativity, has been utilised to help understand how femininities are constructed and maintained. Foucault and the work of post-structural feminists has also been useful in supporting the specificity of the case study approach adopted and in allowing me to explain why some performances are prioritised over others.



## **Section one - Introduction**

### **1) Setting the scene**

After being appointed at the school in January 2000, initial ideas for my doctorate were to compare the performance of the A-level cohort as a whole and to relate this performance to similar single-sex boys' schools and perhaps to mixed-sex schools. My interest in this topic was partly a result of the widespread concern about the differential achievement of boys and girls. Yet as the pilot study was carried out analysis was limited and I was confronted with issues of how to categorize, leaving me feeling uneasy. The examination statistics revealed little about the people that the school was 'producing.' The very idea that the school 'produces' was one that was recurrent and appeared to be implicit in the understanding of the school's role by many teachers. Similarly, the students seemed to be grappling with dilemmatic issues in relation to school systems and expectations. Therefore the focus shifted to the students, the girls in the school, and the complexities of identities within this particular single-sex setting. The journey of this research is characterised by the move away from quantitative certainty and into the confusions of individual experiences and identities. This process has not been painless. I have discarded obsolete literature, rethought methodological issues and have responded to the themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis, following a very different path from the one I originally envisioned.

A case study approach was adopted. The site was a girl's independent school in West London, which is part of a larger trust that oversees the running of a number of schools. The school has places for between 560 and 570 girls and is ranked within the top 50 independent schools. The sixth form cohorts, who were the central focus of this study, consisted of 66 students finishing in 2002, 70 students finishing in 2003, 54 in 2004 and 76 will leave in 2005. Approximately 60% of students in the senior school attended the junior section, which is located on the same site. Some students have studied up to GCSE elsewhere but these students are in the minority. Approximately 90% of sixth form students have studied in the school since year 7 (age 11). Although it is rare, a few individuals leave (or are advised

to leave) due to failure to perform at high levels in their AS-level examinations, poor attendance and/or poor performance in standard school class work and homework. The school brochure makes it clear that it is an 'unashamedly academic school' (p3).

I hope that the issues I analyse may contribute to understandings of the ways in which gender identities are constructed within single-sex schools, but I make no claim that this coverage will be exhaustive or comprehensive. Even in this single sex environment it is neither appropriate nor possible to capture representation of the experiences of all girls. Most of the girls in this particular Independent school are from a middle-class background and some are black or from ethnic minority backgrounds. The middle-class girls' experience has often been ignored (Walkerdine et al, 2001), so I intend to use this experience as a strength in this research. As most research is problem-centred, the foregrounding of the underachievement of boys and the resulting lack of a perceived problem in relation to girls means that girls' voices are no longer heard. Their educational success seems to say it all so they remain invisible. Therefore this research aims to increase the visibility of girls' experiences in school by allowing their voices to be heard.

#### **(ii) The new orthodoxy: the 'problem' with boys**

Debates about gender differentiation and equal opportunities in schools provide a backdrop to this study. Since the mid-1990s the developing orthodoxy has been that girls do well and the 'problem' is boys' underachievement (OFSTED, 1996). Statistical research supports this view with achievement differences present from age 6, girls outperforming at key stage tests, GCSEs, A-levels and gaining more first-class degrees (Arnot et al, 1998; Pirie, 2000). This "gulf" between the sexes is emphasized in the media (Clark, 2001; Cunningham, 2001; Fresco, 2001; Garner, 2001; Miles, 2001a; 2001b; O'Leary, 2001; Wolchover, 2001) and boys' poor behaviour (3 or 4 more times likely to be excluded than girls) is also stressed (Lloyd quoted in Salisbury & Riddell, 2000; p.260).

Yet girls' apparent achievement is undermined by views that assessment has been feminised (Warrington & Younger, 2000), examinations are not as



difficult (Pirie, 2000), 'GCSE places a heavy premium on clerical or other skills which are incidental to intellectual achievement, but in which girls show a marked advantage' (Turner quoted in Marks, 2001; p.20). When girls 'fail' it is attributed to the lack of logical thinking skills, positioning girls as 'deviant' (Young, 1971; p.25; Foster, 2000). When boys fail it is because of societal factors beyond their own control. One headteacher noted that that she was surprised by the outcry at girls outperforming boys at both levels (GCSE/A-level) for the first time as 'for years and years when girls were underachieving no-one addressed it and suddenly boys have become a high priority' (Pain, 2000).

Gender difference can be exaggerated and some newspapers recognise that 'the gap between boys and girls is small enough to miss with the blink of an eye' (Lea et al, 2001). The statistics themselves are problematic with boys outperforming girls at some stages in Maths and Science.

'Blanket statements about girls performing better than boys or vice versa are difficult to justify: reference should always be made to a specific aspect of the curriculum' (Arnot et al, 1998).

As well as ignoring disparities across subjects, comparing boys and girls can ignore differences between girls obscuring differences of ethnicity and social class (Arnot et al, 1998). Heath (1999) argues that there is a need for school-based work that sensitively addresses issues of the construction and performance of femininities. This debate will allow a focus on how gender identities are constructed within schools and illuminate the complexities of differential gender achievement, behaviour, motivation, femininities/masculinities, sexualities etc. that lie beneath popular gender debates.

### **(iii) My place in the research**

As a male teacher carrying out this research, I faced ethical and methodological dilemmas. I was aware that there would be certain issues that female students would not feel comfortable discussing with a man and ethically I did not want them to share views in a way that made them uncomfortable. Yet I was surprised by the keenness with which students were willing to discuss their own experiences. I did not want to stop them, I

was finding things out, but I was concerned about whether this was because they still felt they had to share views because I was a teacher. When discussions moved towards sensitive areas such as relationships or sexuality I was keenly aware of a desire to shift the discussion to 'safer ground.' I believe this was a suitable approach and this is a function of my own teacher identity and awareness of what is appropriate for discussion but I was also conscious at times of opportunities missed. Social interactions are socially mediated and interviews were dictated by the influences that I have internalised through my experience as a teacher. A key influence is the desire to avoid circumstances where the power of the teacher is abused and my manipulation of discussions (silencing their views) sometimes sacrificed the methodological approach of allowing their voices to emerge to preserve a safer ethical position.

In many ways my own background, gender and educational experience is at odds with those of the girls in this institution. My parents are working class and live in an area with high degrees of social deprivation. The bulk of my experience of secondary education has much more in common with the social worlds described in research such as 'Learning to labour' (Willis, 1977) or 'Humour as resistance' (Dubberley, 1988) than research on grammar/independent girls' schools such as Evans (Evans, 1991). Yet many of the key themes that did emerge appear to cross gender, class, time and geographical divides. For example, the freedom and space to express opinions in the comprehensive school I attended was only present in situations where it was OK to be interested and where you would not be perceived as a 'swot.' I was given an assisted place to attend the sixth form of a much larger, reasonably prestigious independent school in Manchester that has much in common with the school structure and ethos of achievement this study finds. Similarly, the difference between my parents' view of education and the very positive view of education found in middle class parents in London is negligible. The decision not to contribute to the 'din of anxiety', where massive amounts of research is directed at male behaviour, was a conscious decision to try to uncover some of the complexities of identities, gender inequalities, feminism and girls' school



experiences that are in danger of becoming obscured in current mainstream educational debate (Mahony, 1998).

Although I do not personally know what it is to be a woman or share the experiences and inequalities of this position, my aim is liberatory and supportive of the principles of feminism. I reflect on the debate with a group of girls involved in the research:

JM: Can a man be a feminist?

[All agree]

Niamh: There was Emmeline Pankhurst's husband.

JM: What was he called?

Niamh: Doctor [laughs]

Katie: Very good.

Niamh: I suppose if he was in a whole household of women you can't really argue you'll just go along with it to make life easier.

*2004 Cohort, June 2003*

As issues of 'language, power, reason, identity and resistance' form central strands of the research, I have drawn upon feminist post-structural research (Bryson, 1999; p.36) and I view my own position as pro-feminist. Some male researchers have positioned themselves as feminists (Digby, 1998) but I feel uncomfortable in this position. I can support the proposition that feminism is a political movement and feminists share an ideology, not necessarily sex attributes (Francis, 2000), but I feel that calling oneself a feminist is a position that should be reserved for those who encounter the potential inequalities and experiences that feminism struggles against in their everyday lives. Probyn, examining the work of Paul Smith notes a key problem in that 'men can know feminist theory, yet they cannot know that which fuels it' and asks the key question 'why is it that male students and colleagues always assume that only women have gender?' (Smith in Probyn, 1993; p.47/8). If a feminist perspective 'consists of keeping in the forefront of one's mind the lifestyles, activities and interests of more than one half of humanity – women' then my research is clearly feminist yet this definition is perhaps too simplistic (David et al, 1997; p.90). Margaret Boden quoting Thomas Nagel outlines the dilemma clearly:

**'We could know everything there is to know about the objective facts of bat behaviour and neurophysiology, without knowing 'what it is like' to be a bat' (Nagel, 1974 in Cornwell (ed.) 1998; p.1).**

**(iv) Summary: The main aims of the research and the tools for analysis**  
My aim is to go beyond the statistical analysis of gender differences and focus on the identities girls adopt, those they reject and how this process occurs within the context of the single-sex school. Gender identities can be linked to girls' achievement and performance. The identities constructed in a successful single-sex school support positive performances and high achievement (Bell, 2004) so illuminating the issues affecting this construction is of great value. The single-sex school is part of wider societal structures so girls are not 'free' from gender expectations but they appear to be able to adopt a wide range of femininities.

Bourdieu provides a useful framework for examining identities and explaining why a wider range of positions might be available in the single-sex institution. I have also drawn on the work of Foucault and Butler to aid my analysis. Foucault's work stresses the historical and social specificity that supports my decision to adopt a case-study approach and Butler's notion of performativity helps explain the way certain identities are adopted and others rejected. I will outline the literature that has informed this study in section two. There are methodological considerations involved and the male teacher researching girls is certainly an issue that requires an explanation. This is addressed in section three where I also make the case for the case study, explain the methodological journey of this research and outline the methods more fully.

The fourth section focuses on the voices of the girls and analyses the key research question examining how the single-sex school impacts upon the construction of gender identities. Issues of gender identities cannot be revealed without reference to the voices of the girls. The processes and practices that characterise the institutional structure also need to be described. Teachers, the headteacher, the prospectus and the girls themselves describe this structure in the data analysis section. It is the

relationship between school structure and the individual identities of those who operate within it that is the key focus. Such relationships are complex and it is this complexity that it will be the central aim to reveal. The research does raise issues for policy and practice within this particular institution, which may have wider relevance, but such comments are tentative in nature given the scale of this case study and indicate further questions and directions for further research.



## **Section two - Literature review**

### **Chapter one - Introduction**

The literature review provides the backdrop to my exploration of gender identities within single-sex schools. Therefore my starting point is to examine debates that surround the single-sex school. The performance of girls in schools has been subordinated in research literature by the concern about boys' achievement/behaviour. This is partly a result of growing concern about perceived disparities between the performance of gender groups and, more specifically, the shift towards a concern that boys underachievement is at least partly due to a feminisation of schooling structures such as the reform of the examination system. This link typifies dilemmas emerging from the relationship between gender identities, school performance, school structure and wider debates that I aim to outline in the section as a whole. Although the single-sex school has been a focus of debate, 'the search to establish what is 'distinctive' about single-sex institutions (and especially girls' schools) needs to continue' (Arnot et al, 1998; p.47).

In chapter three I address the literature that can be used to understand the debates and dilemmas surrounding gender identities. Given the wide coverage of issues, this is no more than a brief overview intended to sketch out the key theoretical aspects of the thesis. I use chapter four to show how the concepts of Bourdieu are useful in studying the single-sex school. The structured nature of social settings both reflects and contributes to wider societal understandings and in-school conventions resist and reproduce these wider knowledges. Bourdieu has produced a prodigious body of work and this review can only offer a sparse outline of his concepts but I aim to highlight the Bourdieuan concepts that have been used in the empirical analysis. In the concluding chapter I summarise the key themes within gender identities research. Notions of femininity/masculinity, sexuality, power and control and performativity influenced my understanding of the construction of gendered identities within the single-sex school. In the same way the data began to form around these central themes, the literature that remains is the research that influenced the final analysis.

Before outlining the key debates surrounding gender identities it is necessary to offer some key definitions. Pacchter offers a concise summary of these terms (Pacchter, 1998; 2001). Gender identities are complex but sex and gender are important aspects of our personal identities. Sex refers to the biological characteristics by which a person is categorised male or female. *Gender assignment* is the process of categorising a person male or female and is usually aligned with biological sex. *Gender identity* is how a person feels about their assignment and this is an individual internal process that can only be gauged by asking them. *Gender role* is the set of behaviours that a certain gender performs and is often discussed in terms of femininities and masculinities. Traditionally, *femininity/masculinity* was seen as a biological fact, sex/gender were intrinsically linked. However the notion that girls (or boys) are 'passive subjects who receive their gender identity as given' has been challenged (Jones, 1996; p.311). My focus is on how this gender identity is constructed in this single-sex school context.



**Chapter two - Debates surrounding single-sex schools**

*'Feminist debates here highlighted the controversy about co-education or single-sex schools, whether girls should be entitled to school subjects which reflected their interests, whether school culture should address female values (competition versus hierarchy) or whether the different forms of authority used by women teachers (caring ethic etc.) should be validated.'*

(Arnot and Dillabough, 2000)

There has been a tradition of concern about girls' schooling. The founders of the girls' public day schools (first-wave feminists) placed an emphasis on academic education to allow women to take a definitive role in society. The liberal feminist view of single-sex schooling for girls focused on challenging the gender inequalities perpetuated within co-educational schools. From this perspective, girls' schools or girls-only classes offer the space to develop identities unencumbered by the influence of boys, free from distraction (Spender, 1982; Roker, 1993; Fisher, 1994). This belief remains strong and it is not limited to the UK (Salomone, 2003).

Researchers in other countries have noted that there is a perception that girls will do better in academic subjects at a single-sex school (Harker, 2000).

In recent years the research focusing on girls' experiences in education has fallen out of favour (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). The academic success of girls, particularly girls attending girls' schools, has led to a preoccupation with the 'poor boys' and marginalized masculinities (Epstein et al, 1998; Kenway, 1997). The apparent success of girls' schools implicates them in the educational failures of boys due to the absence of girls' civilising effect (Dale, 1969; 1971; 1974). Where girls are considered, it is in terms of their relative academic success obscuring the fact that there is actually very little debate about the ethos and impact of girls' schools on gender identities (Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Even the idea that girl's schools are more academically successful because of gender segregation has been contested. OFSTED reports echo the classic view - "girls' schools are generally found to perform best, mixed schools next and boys school least effectively" – but such reports acknowledge that

the issue is complex and that the performance of single-sex schools “may be a function of other factors such as parental support, social class and the attainment of pupils on entry to the school” (OFSTED, HMSO, 1996; p.25). Much research finds no significant correlation between school organisation and pupil achievement once social class and factors connected with single-sex schools, such as parental support, ability and socio-economic backgrounds, are controlled for (Arnot et al, 1998; Bell, 1990; Bone, 1983; Faulkner, 1991; Daly, 1996; Hannan et al, 1996; ILEA 1990; Nuttall et al, 1992; Sammons, 1995; Steedman, 1985; Thomas et al, 1994; Thomas and Elliot, 1997; Robinson & Smithers, 1999; Sukhnandan et al, 2000; Gorard et al, 2001). Gender debates need to analyse girls’ experiences within single-sex schools more comprehensively.

Single-sex schools have promoted the concept of equality but this is a problematic ideal (Salomone, 2003). The same/different debate asks whether equality means same treatment or different treatment to achieve equality. If the answer is that the single-sex school offers a different experience in order to attain equal opportunities for girls then we need to examine whether this has ‘side effects.’ One dilemma may be whether this is a deficit model in which girls are positioned as being unable to compete with boys and must be nurtured/protected thus reinforcing traditional femininities (Kenway & Willis, 1998). Such femininities position girls as passive, quiet and uncompetitive or, worse still, as lacking the motivation, encouragement and opportunity to achieve their potential and/or to enter into non-traditional areas of the curriculum (Arnot, 2002).

By promoting high achievement and career aspirations, single-sex schools can challenge traditional femininities that emphasize nurturing and care (Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Early girls’ schools assumed that marriage and career would be mutually exclusive (Paechter, 1998) creating a position of professional spinsterhood (Summerfield, 1987). This dilemma of how to balance career, relationships, families and children is still present. Some feminists argue that only with single-sex schools, with an all-female staff (and head) and a curriculum which resists traditional patterns of socialisation, will girls be able to learn how to challenge positions of



subordination (Spender, 1988). Yet viewing the school as being able to challenge gender inequalities places the single-sex school outside its cultural and historical position and asks it to challenge women's supporting role within capitalist societies that it was set up to reinforce (Butler, 1990). It may overstate the role of the school in relation to other socialising factors such as the family.

A further dilemma is that single-sex schooling reduces 'the opportunities pupils have to test gender stereotypes against the actual behaviour of classmates of the other sex' (Stanworth, 1981; p.19). Yet girls in single-sex schools are more likely to pursue further and higher education generally, and in particular, are more likely to take advanced courses in science subjects (Bird & Varlaam, 1985; Arnot et al, 1998; Arnot, 2002). An explanation for this is that the processes of stereotyping are more marked in schools where 'the gender division between the genders are daily confronted and the pupils are constantly exposed to differentiation by gender' (Barrett, 1989; p.60). Where single-sex classes have been advocated within mixed sex schools, girls have tended to express satisfaction with single-sex groupings but it is unclear whether this is a short term and temporary expedient (Jackson & Smith, 2000; Elwood & Gipps, 1999). The recent move towards single-sex groupings seems to have been a reaction to boys' underachievement enabling 'boy-friendly' techniques to be employed (Francis & Skelton, 2001). This may rest upon an assumption that girls will learn regardless and could mean that some girls fail to reach their potential as lessons are less appropriate to their needs and the focus is on boys' performances (Warrington & Younger, 2003; p.348). Certain teaching strategies thought appropriate for use with boys' classes, particularly those that emphasise competition rather than cooperation, may also reinforce qualities associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity and male teachers can encourage 'laddish' behaviour when teaching such groups (Warrington & Younger, 2003).

A further consideration is the extent to which school organisation can be seen as a key variable in individuals' sense of self. Living curricular surrounds individuals who position themselves in relation to these curricular

(Taylor, 1991; p.10). School is only one area of influence but the separation of students into different schools on the basis of gender may strengthen the influence of gender as an organising principle (Arnot, 1985; Keise, 1992). Even if feminist ideology is an active element of single-sex school experience, how such ideology impacts upon girls' identities and is balanced against their wider experience is complex and unclear (Epstein, 1999).

A problem of the single-sex school debate is that it can assume that *all girls* are performing similarly within mixed and/or single-sex schools: 'More research at national and international level on how effective different schools are for different sub-groups within categories (for example, lower working-class girls) would be extremely helpful in clarifying some of the issues further' (Elwood & Gipps, 1999; p.30). Research detailing girls' supportive and passive behaviour in classrooms and boys domination of talk (French and French, 1984; Spender, 1982; Delamont, 1980) often neglects in-group differences (Hammersley, 1990; Swann, 1998). It also does not consider the shifting power relations within classrooms or illuminate motives underlying various types of behaviour. The range of schools that are encompassed by single-sex and mixed-sex also muddles the comparison between single-sex and mixed sex schools. This further strengthens the argument for a case study approach that can take into account the contextual issues affecting schools.

Although it is nearly thirty years since the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, the debate about single-sex schooling is an expression of the uncertainty about what equal opportunities means for girls and what education for girls should be. There is still no consensus on appropriate school organisation, pedagogy or how to guarantee equal opportunities. Arnot argues that 'there is just as much confusion today' as there was in the 1940s when the Newsom report concluded that it was 'all very difficult' (Arnot, 2002; p.78). I would argue that the debate often implies a homogenous 'girls' experience. Arnot and Dillabough believe the single-sex school debate obscures wider debates concerning how the female citizen is viewed within wider society (Arnot & Dillabough, 1999; 2000). Other research argues that the boy versus girl debate needs to be reconceptualised towards policies of anti-subordination



that can also account for differences between girls and within groups (Salomone, 2003).

These single-sex school dilemmas are present in this particular independent girls' school. It is possible to argue that some of the debates surrounding girls' schools impact upon the construction of gendered identities within the school. Analysing such schools from a Bourdieuan perspective uncovers those aspects of single-sex schooling that operate to (re)produce gender identities. It also involves an examination of the common-sense assumptions about how girls should be and how they should be organised and taught. In addition the use of Foucault to analyse the discourses that affect gender identities, and the use of Butler's notion of performativity to examine ways in which girls perform these identities, illuminates how girls construct gender identities within the school.

**Chapter three – Debates and dilemmas in (gender) identities research**

*'Children get gender from everywhere. '*

(Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003)

**(i) Identities: unitary or fragmented?**

It is not a simple matter to explain what identity is or what it means.

Identities can be viewed as a persons' subjective understanding of whom they are, a sense of the self. Identities also refer to the objective qualities, the categories or definitions that are placed upon us by ourselves or others. A huge range of variables, including gender, class, race, sexuality and physical ability will have an impact upon a persons' identity. Yet identities are not just about what we are. Identities are often defined by what we are not, by difference, and are constructed in terms of oppositions – man/woman, healthy/unhealthy, straight/gay, black/white (Woodward, 1997). A key debate about identities revolves around whether they can be conceptualised as unitary or fragmented entities (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). Do we have one identity or many selves?

From an early stage, identity research was concerned with the conflicts of selves in adult lives and the process of becoming different selves in different situations. James argued that 'a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind' (James, 1890; p.190). Such identities are not always in harmony. James discussed how the self can be presented as demure to family members yet as a 'pirate' when with friends (James, 1890).

A secure sense of identity is clearly important. Harter argues it satisfies basic needs, the most important of which is positive self-esteem (Harter, 1999). A positive sense of self is most likely to occur when a person adopts identities that are accepted by others. Adhering to societal rules and expectations decreases the likelihood that a person will be rejected by others (Harter, 1999). Identities are constructed in the face of these social understandings. Post-structural feminist research rejects over-arching theories to examine the reasoning and values that lie beneath the identities that are deployed in different spaces. Examining these knowledges uncovers



the political and social contingencies of behaviour and allows the 'other voices' to be heard (Weedon, 1987). Post-modernism, although not a monolithic movement, 'attempted to articulate a growing sense of the problematization of identity as a generalized condition of life in a post-war Western society' (Dunn, 1998; p.2). Post-modernism emphasizes the shifting, transient nature of identities in the face of 'an actual plurality of universes' (Harvey, 1990; p.301). In the face of such pluralism, we may desire a coherence to make sense of the world but the proposition that 'identity maintains a high degree of stability' does not seem to be reflected in the social behaviour of individuals (Grodin & Lindlof, 1996; p.6).

## **(ii) Gender identities and the problem of essentialism**

Social and cultural expectations have an impact upon gender identities. Gender specific behaviour is encouraged from birth as children observe and assimilate the behaviour of the adults with whom they come into contact and are rewarded for behaving in gender appropriate ways (Clarricoates, 1980). Researchers such as Lakoff argued that 'authority figures encourage little girls to adopt a gender specific way of speaking which displays their femininity linguistically' in the same way as wearing frilly dresses signifies femininity physically (Cameron, 1997; p.26). Psychoanalytical theories argue that gendered subjectivity is central to identities but the process is 'precarious, not easily achieved and ever incomplete' (Kehily, 2002; p.41). Understanding how identities are constructed is crucial because it takes place within the context of a gender order that dictates dominant ways of being (Connell, 1987).

Historically, Western culture has evolved theories of gender difference that emphasized the polarity between men and women. These theories developed partly through religious traditions and stories/myths that presented women in a subordinate position (i.e. Adam and Eve). Such theories have focused on 'essential' biological differences perceived as fixed and 'natural' i.e. women's childbearing capabilities justify their (less valued) position within the home as carers and nurturers. In order to illustrate the essential biological difference, scientific research sought to emphasize women's



lower brain weights, childlike skulls and their 'innately impulsive, emotional, imitative qualities' (Stepan, 1990; p.39-40).

Such views also underpin dichotomies such as man/woman, mind/body, reason/emotion, aggression/care, science/nature, public/private that have been part of Western philosophical thought since the enlightenment. These dualities are gendered with the male attributes accorded higher status (Paechter, 1998; Francis, 2000). As a result, female gender identities are often formed in relation to what it is to be male (Walkerdine, 1990; Kehily, 2002). This tradition of dualism has clear consequences for gendered identities whereby a social norm is manufactured and exceptions are marginalized, seen as deviant, 'other' or simply dismissed (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Paechter, 1998). Within traditional dualisms, women are positioned as objects and passive whilst men are subjective agents and active. In such dichotomies man is 'the Absolute – she is the Other' (de Beauvoir, 1953; p.14-16). In constructing an identity there is always something outside. Identities rest upon what one is not as well as what one is. Being cast as 'Other' within language and discourse places one outside the dominant group (Paechter, 1998; p.6) but the dominant group could not exist without the 'other.' Kenway identifies the *ego ideology* by which an individual defines their group by positioning the 'other' as inferior (Kenway, 1990). This promotes social bonding, positive mutual regard and defines insiders and outsiders whilst the *alter ideology* enables the superior group to persuade the 'other' of the justice of the system (Kenway, 1990).

In challenging gendered dichotomies, it has been argued that liberal feminists were *essentialist*. This places some women as 'other.' They presented an *essential* 'womanness', despite obvious racial, class, religious, ethnic and cultural differences between women (Phoenix, 1987). The work of Spelman (1990) and Butler (1990) has been influential in arguing that this obscures the heterogeneity of 'women' and impedes an examination of difference but it makes political action more problematic:

'this leads us to the paradox at the heart of feminism: Any attempt to talk about all women in terms of something we all have in common undermines attempts to talk about the differences among us, and vice

versa. Is it possible to give the things women have in common their full significance without thereby implying that the differences among us are less important? How can we describe the things that differentiate women without eclipsing what we share in common?' (Spelman, 1990; p.3).

As much early feminist research was written by white middle class women, it is unsurprising that it is white middle class women who are the focus of this research. Spelman compares early feminist theory and its white middle-class nature to theories with which men have dominated women. Although such research is criticised for its essentialist tendencies by later feminist writers (who Spelman does not name), it is an easy task to recognise sins because, in so doing, you remain centre stage. The notion of inclusion is hardly a radical political shift if all you are doing is allowing non-white middle class women to be either subsumed or tagged on to your modified and inclusive 'non-essentialist' thinking (Spelman, 1990). Other researchers have followed this line and black women have resisted inclusion in a category of woman that is overwhelmingly white (Aziz, 1992).

This has led to something of an identity crisis within feminist research itself and has an implication for political action (Cameron, 1997). What can be demanded in the name of women if women do not exist? (Kenway, 1992). The second wave of liberal feminism resulted in major gains such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and Sex Discrimination Act (1975) but they were advances with set boundaries and clear limitations (Coppock et al, 1995). There is less focus for political action, no single 'enemy', if 'women' do not share a common identity. Similarly, recognising the dispersal of male power across different contexts still leaves many women suffering inequalities. Versions of feminism that recognise difference appear to offer a less powerful alternative to the liberal feminist programs for action criticised as being essentialist (Francis, 1998). This has led to calls for a 'strategic essentialism' (Bailey, 1993; Francis, 1998). This acknowledges difference between women, remains aware of its own weakness, but aims to contribute to emancipatory, political practices:-



**'politics would be more effective if you knew the different ways in which you were likely to be heard, what your assertion of identity was doing' (Riley, 1992; p.122).**

**If it is generally accepted that gender identities are not fixed, stable or independent of context, the issue of how gender identity is assumed and maintained still remains problematic. Researchers have argued that the importance of the role of gender to subsequent psychological development has not been explained adequately (Sayers, 1997). Earlier gender identities research reproduced gender binaries and underplayed overlapping between genders therefore suggesting cultural determinism (Bing & Bergvall, 1996; Litosseliti & Sunderland, 2002). Post-structuralist feminism challenges this by acknowledging the 'emotional complexities of gender in everyday life' (Connell, 1993; p.599; Flax, 1990). Broadly speaking, post-structuralist feminist research attempts to uncover and deconstruct issues of gender identities often utilising the conceptual frameworks of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan (Kehily, 2002). This is done without assuming that experiences are common to all women, and by stressing the dilemmas and problems in researching gendered identities.**

### **(iii) Foucault and the 'gaze'**

**Foucault's conception of power has been influential in supporting the emergence of theories such as post-structural feminism. Discourses can be defined as ways of seeing or knowing the world (Kehily, 2002). They are evidenced by the ideas, talk, silences and behaviours within any social field (Johannesson, 1998). They are the normalized ideas and practices, the said and the unsaid, that constitute our knowing. For example, the 'dominant discourses of female sexuality, which define it as naturally passive, together with dominant social definitions of women's place as first and foremost in the home, can be found in social policy, medicine, education, the media and the church and elsewhere' (Weedon, 1987; p. 36). Foucault views power as flowing from everywhere and this undermines an essentialist view of power i.e. men do not hold power just because they are men (Foucault, 1976). The notion of patriarchy through which men exert power over women becomes too simplistic if, as Butler argues, the 'very subject of women is no longer**

understood in stable or abiding terms' (Butler, 1990; p.1). Furthermore, the emergence of a fragmented, post-modern society means that viewing women as a powerless group struggling against universal, centralised patriarchal forces is flawed (Woodward, 1997). Language and texts position people and things in different ways e.g. a housewife can be a victim of oppression in some types of feminist discourse or powerful, fulfilling an idyllic role in conservative discourse (Francis, 2000).

A number of feminist researchers have considered the value of the work of Foucault (Ramazanoğlu, 1993; Hollway, 1984; Barrett, 1992; Skeggs, 1997; Coates, 1999; McLeod, 2000). Firstly, it can be used to understand issues of power in relationships through analysis of the operation of discourses in social practice. Secondly, it can aid feminists in challenging the traditional view of the nature and causes of women's subordination (e.g. biological determinism) through the use of terms such as knowledge, power, senses of the self and sexuality that offer a more holistic way of researching difference between women. The dilemma is that whilst Foucaultian frameworks offer a means of examining issues such as women's bodies and sexuality within discourses of language and power that are socially and historically specific, there is the danger that this disintegrates the efficacy, validity and even the possibility of collective political strategies (Skeggs, 1997). If there is no coherence to our existence and our lives are discursively produced then this means we are prisoners within language and discourse and any agency we may have is limited by discursive possibilities open to us. Yet power is not solely located in discourse (Francis, 1998).

The possibility of multiple social identities does exist within a Foucaultian framework but we cannot be anything. The power of discourse may be overstated and the material body cannot be ignored completely (Francis, 2000, Paechter 2001). Whilst bodies can be changed and are not fixed, the body is the means through which we perform gender and it dictates how this gender is performed. Paechter gives the example of the tall broad shouldered female sailing instructor who may find stereotypical femininity difficult as the body is too strong and powerful but the body may have developed this way due to a refusal to conform to stereotypical femininity in



the first place; 'The two intersect and interact' (Pacchter, 2001, p.50). The relationship between structure and practice is dialectical. There is the potential for individuals to adopt non-conforming stances (Ramazanoğlu, 1993). To use a simple example, biology does not prevent men adopting the role of child carer after birth but the power of discourses that position this as 'unnatural' do help to explain why many men do not perform this role. Whilst a criticism of Foucault is that he can overstress the flexibility of identity in discourse and remove the material body completely from consideration, the notion that we can challenge essentialisms and accepted understandings of our gender role is a useful tool for pro-feminist research. Discourses are never secure enough to guarantee particular hegemonic masculine or feminine positions eternally.

Foucault used the example of the Panopticon to show how the sense of being under surveillance acted to make individuals police their own behaviour so that power did not need to be exercised (Foucault, 1979). Prisons and schools create separated individualities through their architectural design and their daily rules and routines. Behaviour can be monitored, supervised and corrected. In schools there is 'no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time' and teachers can also be monitored in the same way through the observation of their students (Foucault, 1979; p.203). Thus standards and values are imposed. 'Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere' (Foucault, 1979; p.195). Pacchter sees the 'gaze' as being important in casting girls as the 'other' (Pacchter, 1998; p.16). The 'gaze' focuses on girls and operates to police their behaviour (and makes them police themselves) preventing them from behaving in ways that would result in derogatory labels (Pacchter, 1998). The gaze illustrates how the sense of self will reflect gendered societal values as 'children come to internalise the standards and values of those who are important to them' (Harter, 1999; p.13).

These standards and values are immersed within powerful discourses and the 'gaze' is strongly heterosexual. Hollway (1984), examining sexuality, identified three discourses that have a strong influence on how women are positioned – male sexual drive discourse, have/hold discourse and the

permissive discourse. The first presents women as 'other' whereby the male biological drive dictates the position of women as biologically determined and secondary. The have and hold discourse is where some girls are conferred power by attracting a man but sexuality is simply a prelude to the joy of the maternal instinct which will control a dangerous sexuality. The final discourse challenged ideas of monogamy and, in theory, is gender blind but appears to have freed men and further inhibited women. Such discourse reinforces male/female difference but suggests a range of positions for women. Not all these positions are equally acceptable to the male gaze (Paechter, 1998) and where women adopt non-monogamous positions they face disapproval (Lees, 1993).

Yet individuals are not simply trapped in such discourse. They do resist and reproduce their individual and collective identities in order to arrive at an internalised sense of themselves and their position within a variety of groups. Groups and individuals can challenge categorisation and build alternative identities. The way in which the single-sex school contributes to this internalised view of the self and whether it allows a range of positions to be adopted is an important focus of study. It is no easy matter as 'the self is an ensemble of techniques and practices' made up of 'layers and layers of lines and directions that are figured together and in depth, only then to be arranged again' (Probyn, 1993; p.1/2). Post-modernist research uses the plural identities as it more appropriately suggests the way we hold a number of varied identities.

'One or more of these identities may be foregrounded at different times; they are sometimes contradictory, sometimes interrelated: people's diverse identities constitute the richness and dilemmas of their sense of self' (Ivanic, 1998; p.11).

The work of Foucault is useful in supporting an analysis of identities in specific social contexts.

#### **(iv) Judith Butler and performativity**

The work of Butler has been used to frame identities as performances (Butler, 1990) and has had a significant impact upon feminist, gay, lesbian and queer theorists (du Gay, 2000; Paechter, 2001; Kehily, 2002). The



gendered body is created through the performance of various acts that 'create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core' (Butler, 1990; p.136). Therefore in order to maintain a sense of gender identity, individuals perform roles and acts that reinforce gendered expectations.

'This performance is not just for those we encounter, but for ourselves; we create and reinforce our gender identity by the performances we put on' (Pacchter, 2001; p.50).

Butler draws upon Foucaultian concepts to argue that if systems of power produce subjects presumed to be masculine 'an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of "women" will be clearly self-defeating' (Butler, 1990; p.2). However, in creating such subjects the systems of power will operate to conceal the exclusions and unequal distribution of power by making them seem 'natural' and 'common-sense.' To relate this to Bourdieuan concepts, gendered systems of power can be *reproduced* by knowledges disguised as 'natural.'

It is worth noting that performance suggests a pre-existing identity. Someone does the performance. Butler rejects this in favour of *performativity* arguing that performances pre-exist the performer. Therefore it is necessary to focus on gender and sex as *effects* of a persistent but unstable, myriad, dispersed power (Butler, 1993). Criticisms have centred on whether Butler neglects the material and political in favour of her attention to language, killing off the subject in the process, and suggesting a passive, nihilistic stance when she argues that discourses can only be reworked rather than evaded (Nussbaum, 1999). Yet Butler argues for an open political culture of contestation rather than replacing 'one totalising frame of universal political prescriptivism ...with another' (Salih, 2002; p.150). By displacing discursively constructed categories such as boy/girl/male/female, showing the hegemonic position of heterosexual ways of being and showing other ways of doing gender, Butler argues the status quo is challenged more effectively (Butler, 1990).

Performances can be seen in life stories or narratives that invoke a 'personality.' These are constructed as consistent, as an 'accounting strategy' to enable us to make sense of our contradictory positions



(Alasuutari, 1997; p.15/6). These performances reinforce a sense of the self but awareness of the constructed nature of 'personality' also offers the potential for change. However, these narratives are constructed through available gender scripts and what it is possible to be (Walker, 2001).

Discussing sexuality, Weeks distinguishes between 'myths' that 'elaborate an assumed naturalness' and 'fictions', new stories that enable individuals to challenge the idea of a 'natural' sexuality (Weeks, 1999; p.13). These fictions and myths are intertwined in individuals' daily experiences. Thus identities 'are made in history not in nature, and often in highly politicised contexts' (Weeks, 1999; p.16). Myths and fictions are a key part of the girls' performances and a way of exploring, constructing and reinforcing gender identities.

Therefore, Butler's approach is useful in its attempts to reveal the constructed nature of sex and gender by placing them in the context of the discourses through which they are made to seem 'natural' (Butler, 1990). Understandings about gender identities deemed 'natural' within the single-sex school abound (Rhedding-Jones, 1997) and can be related to wider knowledges about women and gender roles. It is interesting to examine language and talk to identify which gender identities are seen as 'right.' This highlights how agents operate within structuring structures. It is not a passive process but individuals 'work up and work to this or that identity, for themselves and others, there and then, either as an end in itself or towards some other end' (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; p.2). Butler's conception of performativity is very useful in understanding the dilemmas for students within the single-sex school that rest upon the negotiation of their identities in the face of 'natural' gendered expectations.

#### **(v) Post-structural feminism & dilemmas**

Butler, and many of the researchers discussed thus far, have been labelled post-structural feminists. What is post-structural feminist (PSF) research? The range and scope of the work carried out under the umbrella of post-structuralist feminism makes it difficult to define common characteristics and has opened it to charges of 'anything goes' (Skeggs, 1997). This is harsh. PSF research seeks to 'explain the working of power on behalf of

specific interests and to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it' (Weedon, 1987; p.41). Gender is viewed as a site of struggle where, for example, words are reclaimed or rejected, used ironically and shift meaning in different contexts. The PSF approach is consistent with the identities position that I have adopted in that the self is a site of conflict and contradiction where an 'identity' consists of many 'selves.' PSFs have drawn on the work of Foucault (and Derrida and Lacan) to deconstruct accepted practices, look at the social/historical construction of selves, and illuminate relationships between language and power (Cammack & Phillips, 2002). Such deconstruction is designed to consider 'notions of reason, knowledge, or the self and to reveal the effects of gender arrangements that [lie] beneath their neutral and universalising facades' (Flax, 1994; p.145). Riley sees the work of Foucault as 'a benevolent and conscientious analysis of how things seem to be' (Riley, 1992; p.128). It can 'promote a sense of... flexibility and lack of closure, and to open up an appreciation of the diversity and richness of ....competing perspectives' (Baxter, 2002; p.17). In terms of my data, PSF research has helped to focus on the dilemmas that surround being a 'woman' and the differing perspectives surrounding this.

PSF research also acknowledges complexity, arguing that traditional views of gender and ethnicity have outgrown their usefulness and that a shift is required from 'simple policy discourses of racial and gender inequality to the 'complex' policy discourses of social exclusion' (Mac An Ghaill, 1999; p.99). PSF research can combat the need to represent everyone and also negates the false idea that you have to justify yourself by citing an all-powerful male force. It frees feminists to pursue specific local struggles without justification to an entirely male system of power and consequent oppositional female powerlessness (Bailey, 1993; p.119). Similarly, Foucault does not deny transformative social projects and argues that there is value in the partial transformations that he argues liberal feminism achieved (Baxter, 2002). Baxter stresses the correlation between post structuralism and feminism that highlights ways of being powerful, allows marginalized voices to be heard to inform the political and illustrates how dominant discourses operate to undermine and marginalize girls' adoption of powerful positions (Baxter, 2002).



**(vi) Identities: Summary of the key issues**

I have briefly outlined several key themes. Gender identities are difficult to define, partly because they are vulnerable, subject to change, and flexible. They are 'fluid, contingent and context-dependent' (Swann, 2002). We *perform* our gender identities differently in different situations with different people. Often we define our individual identities through what we are not. Indeed, identities depend on an 'other' to validate any given position. However, the dilemma for individuals is that we do not necessarily desire this flexibility; if anything coherence is more desirable. Nor can we be anything we want to be. Identities are adopted subject to constraints. We operate in fields of experience that limit the positions we can adopt and these positions are intrinsically linked to issues of power, status and knowledge. It is important to stress the importance of identity:-

'All identities are not equally available to all of us and all identities are not equally culturally valued. Identities are fundamentally enmeshed in relations of power' (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999; p.2).

But although we are not completely free to choose any identity we desire neither are we destined to adopt an identity in any pre-determined fashion:-

'...our identity may be a means of enacting resistance and rebellion. Our identities may be a weight around our neck or a source of pride and joy' (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999; p.2).

In conclusion, the importance of post-structuralist work on identities is that:

'Feminist theorists enter into and echo postmodernist discourses as we have begun to deconstruct notions of reason, knowledge, or the self and to reveal the effects of the gender arrangements that lay beneath their neutral and universalising facades' (Flax, 1990; p.145).

The key argument is that 'there may be nothing about sex, sexed bodies or sexuality including reproduction....that could justifiably be considered as natural, apolitical or ahistorical' (Malson & Swann, 2003; p.192). The aim of deconstructing supposedly 'natural' understandings is to uncover patterns that can lead to the reproduction of gendered inequality and to provide directions for remedying inequality. It is also possible to see the 'interpretative repertoires' that make certain accounts plausible, such as

explaining gender roles through biological sex differences, and identify what is enabled and dis-enabled by these constructions (Wetherell & Potter, 1988 in Riley, 2003).

I am looking at the effects of gender in the social experiences of girls and although we can all be positioned in discourse as powerful and powerless, it must be acknowledged that women do perform different tasks from men and have less access to controlling power (Francis, 1998). Therefore my position draws on post-structural feminist research in terms of the deconstruction of truth narratives but incorporates the idea of a 'strategic essentialism' (Bailey, 1993; Francis, 1998).



**Chapter four - The use of some key concepts of Bourdieu**

The work of Bourdieu has been significant. The themes that emerged from the data were strongly connected to issues such as power, control, space and freedom of expression, and the power of language. These raised further questions, requiring some conception of how individual identities interacted with the structured organisation of the school (and how important the school was upon identities within students' wider experience). This chapter is an outline of the Bourdieuan concepts that have influenced the analysis of the empirical data. Issues of power and control are central to Bourdieu's work and relevant to the study of education and to gender identities in particular. However, I also acknowledge those criticisms that have been levelled at Bourdieu's work. I am drawing very broadly upon Bourdieu's work where it appears to illuminate issues that have occurred within the context of this study. In this sense, what follows is an outline of my understanding of the Bourdieuan concepts that may be employed in studying gender identities in a girl's school context.

**(i) The key concepts of Bourdieu**

*'It is clear that Bourdieu has always been a thorough-going phenomenologist. He has always been consistently anti-essentialist in respect of 'objects' and of 'selves.' There are no realities behind appearances...Biologisms are, for him, all too poorly concealed essentialisms.'*

(Robbins, 1991; p.172/3)

Bourdieu's work can be located within the new direction of sociology of education heralded by Young, who argued for a need to ensure that 'certain fundamental features of educators' worlds which are taken for granted, such as what counts as educational knowledge, and how it is made available, become objects of enquiry' (Young, 1971; p.2). Bourdieu's approach was to encourage researchers to 'construct an alternative perspective on 'common-sense' or 'everyday' events' (Robbins, 1998; p.28). Through this re-evaluating of what is termed 'common-sense', an understanding of the structures or knowledges that lurk beneath them can be uncovered. Bourdieu provides a framework that considers the relationship between objective

structures and the subjectivity of individuals' mental actions but stresses that the relationship of objectivity/subjectivity needs to be made 'a science of dialectical relations between objective structures...and the subjective dispositions within which these structures are actualised and which tend to reproduce them' (Bourdieu, 1977; p.3).

The starting point for the study of the key concepts of Bourdieu's work and theory of practice is the understanding of *culture*. Culture can be defined as all the knowledge, ideas and objects that are the product of human activity. It is the way in which ideas are generated due to the organisation of society that, in turn, dictate the reshaping of this organisation of society that is at the centre of Bourdieu's work. However, Bourdieu interprets culture in two different ways and criticises both. The first sees culture as a 'structured structure' whereby a shared sense of meaning forms the means of knowledge and communication (Bourdieu, 1971a). The second is the functionalist tradition whereby culture is an ideological force or political power, which reinforces or imposes social order through products such as language. The criticism of the former is that it tends to see relationships through anthropological terms and emphasizes primitive societies, whilst the latter emphasizes ideology as the key factor in the maintenance of social control or endurance of the dominant class (depending on whether the functionalist is positivist or radical). Bourdieu's solution is to attempt to synthesize the two interpretations. He views objective structures as dynamic with their own ability to structure and to be structured by individuals operating within them. The efficacy of the symbols or products (such as language) are derived from their relationship with the 'structured structure.' Harker et al term this theoretical base 'generative structuralism' where reality is complex and 'concepts are proposed as flexible and must be examined by the researcher in the empirical setting' (Harker et al, 1990; p.3).

The usefulness of Bourdieu's work to my research is chiefly through his conception of *habitus*, *capital* and *field*. *Habitus* is related to culture in that whilst a person's actions depend upon their own volition, their scope for action is constrained by knowledge, ideas and lived experience that help to



guide future behaviour and experience. Habitus is a concept of the principle that regulates the act (Nash, 1999). Connolly usefully illustrates this with the example of a child brought up in violent home. As a child internalises violent responses she may be limited in her responses to conflict in that she 'knows no different' (Connolly, 1998). Although simplistic, the argument is that as experience is consolidated and reinforced there is an impact on a person's habitus, which is in part dependent on the social structure in which they operate, and have operated. However, I do not wish to imply a certainty about the way in which experience is habitualised. Bourdieu would not condone a simplistic, deterministic reading of such an example. There is individual agency through a limited range of choices. A child who experiences violence may come to reject or resist violence as a response. Yet even if we cannot predict individual action from an analysis of habitus, the experience of the lived, social world will be important in the construction of ideas about the world and, if this is accepted, a person's identities and behaviours will operate in relation to these ideas.

Bourdieu uses the concept of *capital* to help explain how some identities are adopted and others rejected. Capital is represented in a number of forms: economic capital (money and resources), cultural capital (legitimate knowledge and behaviours), social capital (contacts, connections and relationships) and symbolic capital (prestige gained from capital once it is recognised by others) (Bourdieu, 1987). Each of these confers power and status upon an individual. Often they overlap. For instance, wealthy businessmen (possessing economic capital) may be courted by politicians (gaining social capital) and this may be translated into symbolic capital. Bourdieu saw this as an issue of social class but it can be related to the gendered dualities that position masculinity as more a more powerful and worthy position (Paechter, 1998; Francis, 2000). Symbolic capital is the most powerful form of capital as it is embedded into social reality and practice and 'perceived and recognised as legitimate' (Harker et al, 1990; p.13). There is a clear connection with discourses on masculinity and femininity here because what dictates cultural capital depends upon its value within various contexts. This theme emerges in much literature on gender identities. For example, as boys adopt masculine positions to gain cultural



capital within boys' groups this becomes a part of their habitus and Connolly argues that 'this is precisely the means by which discourses come to inform and shape an individual's very sense of self' (Connolly, 1998; p.22). Yet there is scope for change. If boys ceased to value masculine positions, the discourse would cease to exist so there is a complex dialectical relationship between individual habitus and cultural capital that leads to certain positions being seen as more appropriate.

Habitus and capital, intrinsically linked, are dependent on context. Bourdieu utilises the concept of *field* to explain when and where different and contradictory forms of capital become valued. To explain the intellectual field, Bourdieu uses a useful analogy of a magnetic field of power lines where each agent has an influence that determines the structure of these power lines at any given moment (Bourdieu, 1971a). Each of these agents is defined by its position in this field and by participation in the cultural field - 'it is a determined type of cultural unconscious, while at the same time it intrinsically possesses what could be called a functional weight, because its own 'mass', that is, its power (or better, its authority) in the field cannot be defined independently of its position within it' (Bourdieu, 1971a; p.161). In relation to masculine/feminine behaviour, the habitus is partly influenced by the field but the habitus allows the field to exist as a meaningful entity - 'a world endowed with sense and with value, in which it is worth investing one's practice' (Bourdieu in interview with Wacquant in Bourdieu, 1989; p.44). If the field were not seen as valuable the habitus would reject the field. Therefore the relationship is about both knowledge/power and structural relationships/systems within which social agents operate.

Different fields have their own orthodoxies, their own ways of doing things, values, rules and assumptions (Grenfell & James, 1998). Bourdieu uses the idea of *strategy* to describe how an individual acts according to their 'feel for the game' within fields, consciously and/or unconsciously, but within limits set by the accepted practices of a particular field (Bourdieu, 1977).

Lastly Bourdieu has utilised the concept of *reproduction*. It is in the interests of those in more powerful positions to attempt to 'naturalise' the knowledges upon which their hegemony is based. The concept of

reproduction can be used to analyse gender relationships and this relates to debates on single-sex schooling. Arnot argues that 'a separate strategy for one sex...does not challenge the overall reproduction of dominant gender relations' (Arnot, 2002; p.98). Some research has argued single-sex schooling simply reinforces traditional gender inequalities and dualities (Sturges, 1994). Are single-sex institutions by their existence 'proving' that women are essentially different? Do they reproduce traditional femininities or allow students to challenge traditional femininities? In utilising such Bourdieuan concepts these questions can be addressed and the 'thinking-as-usual' can be challenged.

In a similar way, Arnot outlines the usefulness of Bourdieu as drawing together the psychoanalytical and the sociological (Arnot, 2002). This is done through the concept of habitus as it provides a means of theorising gender and sexuality. Arnot argues that this 'avoids either biological determinism or purely ideological analysis' and conceptualises an interactive relationship that moves away from the subjective/objective debate (Arnot, 2002; p.48). The habitus is affected by sociological factors, such as social class, from an early age but by stressing individual agency and strategy, Bourdieu resists a crude deterministic account (Harker et al, 1990).

In conclusion, Bourdieu offers a framework that allows an analysis of the ways in which a person's identity is influenced by culture through their habitus, the struggle to acquire and maintain various forms of capital and the social context – the field – within which an individual finds him/herself at particular times. He also provides a way of understanding silenced individuals through a concept of reproduction and *symbolic violence* whereby the habitus of those imbued with capital in a certain field are able to function more successfully within that field. They have an interest in making this advantage seem 'natural' and common-sense so thereby achieving dominance over groups with less capital and maintaining their hegemonic position.



**(ii) A critique of Bourdieu's concepts**

I will briefly outline some of the main criticisms but then explore whether these criticisms can be overcome. I argue that, whilst there are limits and drawbacks in using Bourdieuan concepts, some of these can be overcome and through recognising criticisms there is an acceptance that the theory is an aid in understanding issues raised by the empirical data but the aim is to:-

'utilize the theory as a lens through which to view the data, recognizing that other lenses may also give useful insights into the topic we explore' (Cammack & Phillips, 2002; p.125).

**The main problems**

The main criticisms of Bourdieu can be summarised briefly. They emerge from a resistance to relativism and resistance to Bourdieu's reinvented materialism. Firstly, concepts such as reproduction and cultural capitalism are based on an excessive materialism as everything revolves around the collection of capital. Secondly, there is a deterministic tone in the idea that habitus dictates future success in the game. Thirdly, some of Bourdieu's concepts, such as habitus, appear to fit into all social settings but others, such as capital, are less clear (Calhoun, 1993; Harker et al, 1990). As a result some researchers have argued Bourdieu's approach has little to offer educational research (Tooley & Darby, 1998).

**Overcoming the problems**

Some criticisms have been based upon work that has been a misrepresentation or misconception of the philosophical context and underpinning of Bourdieu's theories (Robbins, 1998; Nash, 1990). A Bourdieuan framework does not preclude dynamic change and individuals can respond to structures in such a way as to undermine their power through the creation of alternative truths and structures that undermine dominant power structures – 'everything is up for grabs' (Grenfell & James, 1998; p.25). Bourdieu's conception of strategy stresses the role of individual agency in social relations and renders a 'reproductionist' reading of habitus too crude (Harker et al, 1990). Therefore, the argument that the school is a passive instrument for reproduction is too simplistic. Bourdieu argues that 'schooling does have its own power to shape consciousness over and above

the power of the family' (Nash, 1990; p.435). I accept that this assertion is not totally convincing and whether habitus and strategy can adequately explain historical changes in consciousness and 'day to day transformations which continually occur' is a difficult question? (Harker et al, 1990; p.213). However, the use of Foucault perhaps allows some of the day-to-day transformations to be examined and supplements Bourdieuan concepts.

Bourdieu's work attacked the removal of individual agency from accounts of structural patterns (Bourdieu, 1977) but this was an attack on French structuralists and did not consider wider societies particularly work done on more traditional societies. Capital in Bourdieu's accounts is too simple, cannot be universally applied to all societies and is often reduced to being power rather than as a form of mediation in itself (Calhoun, 1993). Harker et al believe capital is an example of the tautology that can be found in Bourdieu's work i.e. capital is struggled for but when we ask what it is the only explanation appears to be that it is something valued so therefore struggled over (Harker et al, 1990).

The appeal of Bourdieu's concepts, unlike Foucault's, is partly their lack of specificity. Bourdieu noted that whilst action theory/control doctrines have been criticised for 'rationalism', this is based on too narrow a definition of rational (Bourdieu, 1971b). Rational can be more appropriately seen as understandable to the participants. It is a recurring theme in Bourdieu's work that the underlying issues of power and attainment of cultural capital dictate much action and he argues:

'[the] ultimate cause of conflicts, real or invented, which divide the intellectual field along its lines of force and which constitute beyond any doubt the most decisive factor of cultural change, must be sought at least as much in the objective factors, determining the position of those who engage in them as in the reasons they give, to others and to themselves, for engaging in them' (Bourdieu, 1971a; p.180).

Therefore my reading of Bourdieu overcomes these criticisms by accepting the flexibility of the link between the objective structures and our subjective positions. Capital is different for different people in different fields at



different times but conflicts and struggles relate to the individuals' view of what is important. This individual agency does not emerge in a vacuum but from the values of particular fields. Therefore we have to look beneath what people say to identify reasons for our ways of being. Yet subjective, individual agency can influence what is valued within fields and this dependent relationship means the two are constantly subject to change.

Bourdieu has been criticised for an overly simplistic conception of class (Sharp, 1980) and an inadequate view of the state's role (Sharp, 1980; Harker et al, 1990; p.211). It is not my intention to discuss these issues other than to recognise the impact within school of wider influences such as values and beliefs that underlie state policies. More problematic appears to be the argument that Bourdieu has no framework for placing concepts such as symbolic violence into a historical context. How do concepts such as reproduction apply to 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain? Are social class issues compatible with a society that has become increasingly classless where traditional industrial areas – the sites for class reproduction – have become less and less homogenous and therefore less conveniently articulated by broad class based theory? (Reay, 1998). However this strengthens my own methodological position. The case study aims to utilise broad themes from Bourdieu and examine them in context. This specificity is Foucaultian in the sense that Foucaultian frameworks stress that power flows from multiple sources and examine how individuals accept or resist the knowledges upon which this power rests (Foucault, 1976; 1979). Bourdieuan concepts applied to a specific case study can shed light on how gender identities are constructed.

Calhoun argues that through analysing the relational organisation of fields, the relation of habitus to fields and the extent of changes in the mode of co-ordinating action it 'contributes importantly to getting contemporary theoretical discourse out of the rut of post-modernist versus modernist' (Calhoun, 1993; p.65). A similar point is that:-

'Despite Bourdieu's commitment to mapping large scale social structure....it becomes increasingly evident that to understand the intersection of capital fields and habitus we must have detailed

ethnographic information, as well as healthy respect for the semiotic complexity of classification struggles and face-to-face verbal interactions' (Collins, 1993; p.127).

Collins also points to a weakness with Bourdieu's use of language where the discursive seems to be reduced to habitus or class without acknowledging the unpredictable or dynamic nature of individual consciousness/agency. Acknowledging this dynamism requires a deconstruction of discourse within a Bourdieuan analysis. However using Foucaultian discourse analysis and the work of PSFs to support Bourdieuan concepts in such a way is not free from problems. Whilst the techniques of deconstructing power that can free women from universal patriarchy, racism and heterosexism can be seen as positive there is a danger that this privilege is one which is accessed only by intellectual women. It also leads to a disintegration of the validity of the term 'woman' increasing the distance between these intellectual women and women unable to gain this privilege perhaps as a result of their class, ethnicity, nationality or educational history (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Some research has shown how women can be positioned subordinately because the language or discourse to challenge accepted practice is not available to them (Cammack & Phillips, 2002). Research that seeks to illuminate dilemmas in girls' lives through analysis of their voices can identify limiting discourses and support challenges to them.

## Conclusion

Bourdieuian approaches attempt to uncover the relationship between the wider structures and the workings of culture and the individual within these structures. These approaches do acknowledge the potential for change and resistance and that control and power is never certain or absolute. 'Life and daily living are about change – about things happening, about creativity and intelligence at work in the space left open by the incomplete hold of ideologies and institutions' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; p.51). The struggle with these concepts is worthwhile because it forces one to think (Nash, 1999). Yet such theories do not provide solutions and Foucault sums up the role of the intellectual in militancy as

'[providing the] instrument of analysis....what's effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it



possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves by a system of organisation dating back over 150 years. In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield...But as for saying "Here is what you must do!", certainly not' (Foucault, 1980; p.62).

Therefore, there is a need to examine specific cases and to be very clear about the limits of strategies proposed as a result of such examinations.

**Chapter five - Conclusion: key themes**

The impact of the single-sex school on the construction of gender identities is uncertain but research has addressed a number of important questions:-

- What issues of power and control are specific to girls' schools?
- Do single-sex schools allow girls space and freedom?
- Can girls adopt identities that resist traditionally subordinate femininities? How do masculinities impact upon girls who attend single-sex schools?
- Are girls given the opportunity to negotiate sexual identities free from limiting discourses?

In conclusion, I aim to draw out the main debates surrounding these issues. Many of the researchers who address these issues call for further study of girls' experiences in education. There is little consensus about girls' experiences in single-sex schools. The empirical study aims to illuminate some of the girls' experiences in relation to these key concerns of gender identities research.

**(i) Power and control in schools**

Power and control is a key issue in schools. It is inherent in uniform and assemblies and classroom organisation (Atkinson et al, 1993). There is a debate concerning the extent such power and control is related to dominant discourses about the nature of 'girls' and everyday understandings of how girls should behave (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). There is another significant issue of control that can be related to the organisation of classes along mixed gender lines. This is the argument that boys' behaviour has necessitated that girls should be part of mixed classes. Their presence is regulatory as they moderate boys' disruptive behaviour (Warrington and Younger, 2003). They civilise boys (Dale, 1969). A tension between what is good for girls and what is good for boys is clearly a central feature of this debate.

There has also been a rich vein of literature about power in terms of who is in control in girls' schools. Students are presented with living curricula through the everyday life of parents and teachers, and culture plays an important role in shaping students perceptions of gender roles: - 'What is



learnt is often different from what is taught' (Epstein, 1999; p.2). Connell argues that there are four relationships where a 'gender regime' can be examined within schools namely power relations (including control over resources, amongst teachers, over playground space amongst pupils), division of labour (amongst teachers into certain curriculum areas, by task where boys carry heavy items), patterns of emotion (tough deputy principal, issues of sexuality) and symbolism (uniforms, sporting activities, language, gendering of curriculum) (Connell, 2000). There are instances where these relationships overlap but such relationships, particularly the symbolic, echo Bourdieu's notion of school as structuring but also as structured by the agents and the outside influences that the agents bring to bear on the structure (Bourdieu, 1977). Whilst men may hold power, research has emphasized ways in which women do resist subordinating structures (Paechter & Head, 1995; 1996). Single-sex schools may also offer women enhanced opportunities for promotion (Fisher, 1994; Bailey, 1996).

## **(ii) Space and freedom**

Issues of space and freedom overlap with debates about power and control. Post-modernist debates have developed Foucault's focus on the organisation of material spaces (Foucault, 1979; Harvey, 1990). Whilst, space has often been used to indicate physical, material space, I use the term space more metaphorically. The girls' school is physically enclosed from the outside world but it is the space from everyday contact with boys, and the space to think and construct identities apart from boys that I use this term to describe. This opens up the debate about whether single-sex schools reduce pressures to adopt a limiting femininity. Work on female magazines by McRobbie suggests there is more space and freedom in society in terms of the possible femininities women can adopt (McRobbie, 1996; 2000). However this increased space and freedom still operates within wider discourses where masculinity enjoys greater status than feminine positions (Paechter, 1998; 2000). Such discourses can also seek to redefine girls' achievement as limited, based on diligence not skill or ability (Murphy & Elwood, 1996). A tension exists between the potential of increased space and freedom to transcend traditional femininities and the risk of attracting

negative criticism from the external male gaze for betraying this femininity (Pacchter, 2001).

Some of the debates that surround the issue of space and freedom include whether mixed sex schools position girls in the role of civilisers, there to calm down environments where boys are active, loud and physical (Dale 1969). Does the single-sex school really free girls from these perceptions? Does it alter conceptions of their role as supplementary and supportive in relation to male positions? Research has examined the extent to which these dominant discourses are contested despite the space and freedom supposedly offered by single-sex schools (Arnot, 1999). Research has also noted that women have lacked the awareness and therefore the vocabulary to challenge subordinate positions within teaching partly because this subordination is hidden within established knowledges about how things are done (Cammack & Phillips, 2002). Whether single-sex schools provide this vocabulary requires examination.

Research into teacher's expectations by Nash, although rather dated, makes the point that teacher attitude is important in shaping student opportunity and achievement (Nash, 1976). I would go further and argue that identities are also shaped through such interactions and by the expectations of the school's agents. Nash noted that there was no consensus on these expectancy effects and a deterministic conceptualisation of expectancy as directly affecting achievement would be naïve. I am certainly not suggesting that there is a simple relationship between expectancy and identities (Nash, 1976). However further research into how practices within the single-sex school impact upon gender identities and individuals' sense of self is required. It is through social interactions that identities are performed, reinforced, challenged or maintained therefore it is important to analyse such interactions within schools if positions of power and powerlessness are to be made visible and open to challenge.

### **(iii) Femininities/Masculinities**

Pluralizing femininity and masculinity is a post-modernist strategy to stress the range of femininities/masculinities (Connell, 1987; Johnson, 1997).



Masculinities/femininities research has sought to illuminate this range. For instance Reay identifies nice girls, spice girls and tomboys (Reay, 2001b). Mac An Ghaill talks of academic achievers, macho lads, real Englishmen and new enterprisers (Mac An Ghaill, 1994). Some research focuses on women who perform aspects of femininity but do not necessarily recognise themselves as stereotypically feminine (Butler, 1990; Skeggs, 1997; Halberstam, 1998). Reed argues that as women teaching the 'underachieving boy', there is a need to look beyond the dominant discourse (loud, poorly behaved boys who monopolise teacher time) to include 'the painfully quiet boy who rarely speaks to a teacher at all' (Reed, 1999; p.110) and who underachieves for different reasons (Alloway et al, 2003). The research on different femininities was particularly useful as my data began to reveal the existence of 'cool' groups (the 'vultures', 'Finnegan's crew') who performed different femininities from the 'sad' groups.

Stereotypical masculinities and femininities exist as a function of knowledges about acceptable gender roles. These are policed by parents, carers, teachers, and other children and institutionalised within society. In Western society the masculine has been accorded power and status (Paechter, 1998) and as a result men have more invested in maintaining the femininity/masculine opposition so their performance of masculinity takes on increased importance (Mac An Ghaill, 1996).

It is difficult to separate femininities from class or race identities. Middle-class femininity emphasizes academic success to a greater extent than working-class notions of femininity (Frazer, 1993). The basic dilemma for middle-class girls in education is that academic success can conflict with acceptable femininity (Walkerdine, 1987) but performing this 'masculine' rationality role involves challenging gender expectations. The alternative is to perform stereotypical feminine passivity, conformity and vulnerability but be considered less intelligent, flexible or confident learners (Lees, 1993). For boys, behaving well, enjoying reading and working hard can be positioned as feminine, and as a result lose status. Those who adopt these positions but maintain popularity have to work hard to balance this feminine identification with other 'masculine' activities such as sporting prowess

(Martino, 1999). The amount of hard work required to preserve 'acceptable' masculinity/femininity undermines any suggestion of biological determinism and supports the arbitrary, shifting, and fragile nature of identities.

Young people construct masculinity and femininity in different ways and 'acceptable' positions are defined through their 'others.' Recognising a hierarchical structure with a dominant femininity/masculinity is not about 'creat[ing] new boxes, which individuals do not conform to all the time' (Francis, 2000; p.14). Gender is always in progress and relies on the performance of masculinities/femininities to 'create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core' (Butler, 1990; p.136). Within single-sex girls' schools gendered identities are not simply *reproduced* but *produced* through the discourses upon which everyday knowledges about what it means to be girls are based (Kehily, 2002). However dominant femininities can be resisted, dual positions can be held and individuals can deconstruct the myths surrounding femininities/masculinities that masquerade as fact (Walkerdine, 1989).

Girls' magazines or popular culture has the potential to provide spaces for fantasies and liberating fictions that allow them to escape the *symbolic violence* of being forced to deny a more complete sense of the self embracing a wider range of femininities (Harter, 1999; McRobbie, 1996; Walkerdine, 1997). Yet some popular culture, such as soap operas, can tend towards a "narrow and limiting" view of femininity (Taylor, 1991; p.11) or promote a rejection of feminine attributes in favour of 'masculine' behaviours (Moss, 1992). When girls do perform masculinities by being competitive or aggressive this can be constructed as manipulative or bitchy rather than masculine because it 'fits' with expectations about their biologically-assigned sex (Francis, 2000). Society reinforces biological essentialisms through this social categorisation.

Femininities are constructed through the complex relationship of what a person is, the way a person is represented, the way that representation is negotiated, and how the person reacts to it in their social context. Studies



that have taken a longitudinal approach to secondary schooling have noted the pressure on girls to modulate their voices and to narrow their range of expression in the face of constraining conventions of femininity as they move through adolescence (Rogers et al, 1994). Rogers' educationally privileged girls were critical in early adolescence of the conventions that pushed them to conformity and less critical in later adolescence (Coates noted a similar effect, 1999). This can simplistically be interpreted as the triumph of culture and reproduction of traditional gender inequalities. There may be a more sophisticated resistance of these conventions at work with girls politically and psychologically resisting and refusing to internalise traditional inequalities whilst limiting their visible and vocal resistance (Rogers et al, 1994). Other researchers have made the valid point that the school is but one sphere of influence on feminine gender identities and one field of activity. Policies aimed at global change will make slow progress if they are implemented only in one field (Taylor, 1991; Connell, 2000). Children get gender from everywhere (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Although girls outperform boys it does not mean the need to examine femininities in schools is over (Paechter, 2000). Much research has focused on masculinities and it has been noted that some of this research has been anti-feminist and sometimes anti-women (Francis & Skelton, 2001). The position of women is in danger of being overlooked and the debate about boys needs to be located within debates about 'forms of social participation and control, the nature of society itself...and the representation of different voices and value positions within it' (Mahony, 1998; p.52). The implication of the 'din of anxiety' (Mahony, 1998; p.38) about boys and masculinities is that their performance matters, whilst the level of anxiety about girls' underachievement was far less vocal. More research on how the contradictions and dilemmas of femininities/masculinities are experienced within single-sex schools is required to understand the ways in which gender identities are created.

#### **(iv) Sexuality**

In examining the impact of the school on gender identities, sexuality is a major issue. Kehily draws on the concept of the 'hidden curriculum' to

argue that much informal learning concerns issues of sexuality and gender but that this learning is often overt and explicit rather than hidden (Kehily, 2002). Sexuality seeps into everything:-

‘it enters into the power relations of schooling but it is also present in patterns of personal friendship and relationships; fantasies and expectations about future destinies; talk about popular cultural icons; teachers gossiping to teachers about teachers and about students; students’ gossip about teachers and about their contemporaries; and in playground play, bullying and talk’ (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; p.114).

Research by Walkerdine has also been influential in uncovering issues of male power through male sexual discourses (Walkerdine, 1990) and in discussing the de-stabilising effect female sexuality may have upon morality in schools that necessitates censure (Walkerdine, 1997). Sexuality can be used to police acceptable femininities/masculinities. The dominance of the heterosexual order and the positioning of this order as ‘normal’ places homosexual relationships as ‘abnormal’ (Rich, 1980). The dilemmas for young women in girls’ schools revolve around getting a man or career versus family issues. These dilemmas are presented as normal and ‘natural.’ Arnot and Dillabough have been critical of attempts to celebrate the private ‘female’ sphere by maternal feminists as this essentializes women as mothers and nurturers (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000).

Certain identities are constrained if schools assume heterosexuality. Research has sought to uncover this heterosexist structure by acknowledging lesbian and gay identities (Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). In a climate of compulsory heterosexuality, some teachers have seen lesbian and gay as unacceptable terms in sex education lessons (Epstein et al, 2003). Schools are part of a wider culture that also defends heterosexuality as the norm. Parental influence is also significant in supporting such ‘acceptable’ ways of being (Nash, 2003). Schools are sites for the production of social identities where discourses are challenged, accommodated, conformed to or resisted and this struggle occurs at all levels within schools (Lees, 1993; Kehily, 2002). The girls’ school can be seen as a haven from sexual pressures due to the absence of boys whereas



mixed schools subordinate young women through the 'slags and drags' dichotomy (Mahony, 1985). Language is not a neutral tool that describes the world 'as it is' but is an active social process that leads to constructions of meaning and this can be used negatively (Riley, 2003). The absence of boys, who use sexual language to undermine girls (Mahony, 1985), may allow the girls' school to offer an opportunity to challenge limiting discourses surrounding their gender and sexual identities but it is not free from wider societal understandings that may also be present within the single-sex school.

#### **(v) Final points**

This brief review forms the backdrop to the data analysis. Traditional research presented the simplistic opposition of boy/girl based on a set of assumptions about identities and behaviours that are presented as universal, natural and unproblematic. Challenges have come from a wide range of sources but I have shown how post-structural feminists and femininities/masculinities researchers have problematized issues surrounding gender identities.

In my opinion, research needs to be undertaken in highly specific circumstances to uncover the nature of power within structures and cultures, which may operate under the guise that their practices are 'natural' and 'common-sense.' This is a central focus of the empirical work that follows and the aim is to uncover issues, dilemmas and conflicts that characterise discourses and power relations that impact upon the construction of gender identities within a single-sex independent girls' school. This is aided by the adoption of a Bourdieuan framework with a Foucaultian specificity.

The manner in which single-sex institutions have been examined has often been within a comparative framework that evaluates their performance in opposition to boys' schools or mixed schools with limited consideration of differences between girls or with reference to their everyday experiences (Dale, 1969, 1971, 1974; Whitelaw et al, 2000). Some research suggests single-sex schools allow girls to escape the influence of inhibiting gender

discourses (Spender, 1988) yet few UK studies have examined the intricacies of this effect from girls' perspectives.

The literature suggests that there is a need for continued research into the experience of girls in education. Early feminist work was too essentialist; masculinities research doesn't consider school experiences enough; some work doesn't consider teachers. There are a wide range of issues about girl's everyday experiences that remain uncovered (Reed, 1999). There is certainly no consensus on the effects of girls' schools (Spielhofer et al, 2002). Although gender studies have been criticised for challenging patriarchy (long since dead) and/or focusing on one variable amongst all the factors affecting identity, they attempt to examine very real inequalities and gender remains a real issue in women's lives (Francis, 2000). Women's subordinated position is normalised and ingrained in society. I aim to contribute towards a greater consideration of this social inequality through a focus on these girls' experiences.



## **Section three - Methods and methodology**

### **Chapter six - Introduction**

Outlining the journey of this research illustrates the shifts in my understanding of gender identities research and offers an insight into the methodological stance eventually adopted. Whilst much quantitative data was collected in early stages of the research it has come to assume a background position within the research design and where used it is to 'provide quantified background data in which to contextualise the small scale intensive [study]' (Brannen, 1992; p.27/8). As the data was collected, the research focus shifted, the research questions were refined and the original methodology, which rested more heavily on quantitative data, became less appropriate (as did the literature). The process of reformulating my research focus was not undertaken without a great deal of consideration and a significant amount of painful regret given the time spent on this aspect of the study. Whilst the fragments of quantitative data that remain may aid a description of school organisation or broad outlines of the student population, they are much less central to the analysis and to the study as a whole.

The case study approach adopted enabled a shift to greater depth, a consideration of a broad range of themes and facilitated a focus on a smaller sample of students within the sixth form. It allowed an investigation of the dynamics of school experience and an illumination of issues that a larger scale investigation would not have uncovered. However I will address some of the benefits and criticisms in adopting a case study approach here. Lastly, I outline the methods and the context in which they were employed.

**Chapter seven - Methodology****(i) Methodology: the journey towards a qualitative case study framework**

*'For me, each research project is a mental golden journey.'*

(Delamont, 2002; preface)

The journey of this research from quantitative methods to a qualitative approach is at least in part illustrative of changes in my own view of what makes good research. This view was, initially, that achievement and performance could be measured, compared and then generalised. Initially the research took shape along hypothetico-deductivist model where there are only hypothesis relevant facts and the researcher tests the hypothesis by collecting these hypothesis relevant facts (Wengraf, 2001; Scott, 2000). My hypothesis centred on the premise that different types of students may be affected in different ways by school organisation, but that other factors than school organisation were of importance. My approach may have been influenced by entrenched gendered views about what methods would be 'best.' It is not unlikely that some of this influence is part of my own habitus and immersion in an educational world that has traditionally seen certain subjects and ways of thinking – logic and mathematics – as worthy tools to conduct operations in finding 'truth.'

'Novice researchers are often obsessed with being 'scientific'; insofar as this means getting good quality evidence and interpreting and checking it in legitimate ways this is laudable. But it is often taken to mean 'hard science' methods – which are often misunderstood and used inappropriately' (Gillham, 2000; p.5).

The central research question shifted from the impact of single-sex schools on girls' achievement to a focus on girls' identities. As such it became more difficult to use quantitative methods to illuminate issues of gender identities.

The research question shifted as I began to doubt what quantitative analyses of gender difference actually revealed. In some recent studies of school subject preference in single-sex and mixed sex schools, researchers usefully adopt a quantitative approach in order to ascertain the overall pattern of subject choice (Colley et al, 1994). This may allow a broad comparison of



what girls are doing in different school organisations. Yet beyond these broad comparisons how much does it tell us about issues such as *why* certain curriculum areas have become gendered or *how* girls' gender identities impact upon their choices? Such statistical research is at odds with post-structural feminist research as it can obscure subcultures, groups or individual characteristics. As a result of such criticisms there have been calls for statistical research to address these issues (Whitelaw et al, 2000). Whilst this seems reasonable, researchers noted that what is needed is 'the collection of qualitative data' in areas such as subject choices (Colley et al, 1994; p.384). The explicit suggestion here is that whilst quantitative data can generate an overall picture, only through qualitative analysis will a more illuminating picture emerge. This reflects my current perspective, a view that hardened as the research progressed.

'What qualitative work does is to enable the use of knowledge and the production of new knowledge within localised struggles with the self, and in communities with others, to be open for reading, interpretation, creativity and theorizing' (Gunter, 2001; p.454).

Scientific quantitative research as a method has a history that is intrinsically connected to a desire to present conclusions that can be generalised to wider populations. These conclusions are based on an epistemology that is supposedly value-free but feminist and post-modernist researchers have questioned the extent to which any theory of knowledge is value-free, neutral or 'true.' Generalising such conclusions leads to a marginalisation of those groups whose values are not represented within research that has male interests as its focus. Using such methods could be seen as objectionable and sexist because they are androcentric and based on discourses that do not have women as their focus (O'Brien, 1981; Stanley & Wise, 1983, quoted in Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991). This view has been countered by the argument that the methods applied are not as important as the analysis of the methods:-

"it is possible to bring a feminist standpoint to a range of methods; we do not have to accept the 'scientific' model of surveys or reject surveys as necessarily 'non-feminist'" (Kelly et al, 1992; p.246).

It is the *appropriateness* of the methods that is important (Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991). Yet my position seemed to rest upon an underlying assumption that qualitative work was 'not enough on its own.' In interrogating my own position I began to accept that my insistence on a significant quantitative aspect obscured the voices of those participants who now form the focus of the research.

The second problem was that the quantitative data analysis of relative performance at AS and A2 by different groups of students was inconclusive and revealed little difference between groups of students. Yet I would have felt very uncomfortable in suggesting that this equated to a school experience that was the same for all students. For example, interview data had already suggested that individual experience within the school and within wider social lives involved dilemmas that affected girls differently. The quantitative analysis of examination statistics and other data suggested there was some movement of students that was unexpected in terms of their previous measured academic ability, but overall, this line of research was unprofitable and did not reveal genuine differences in achievement, let alone school experience. Some girls did well, some did less well but there were no differences between different groups that were not as great as differences within any of these groups. The realisation was that to keep looking for difference between groups in terms of quantitative academic achievement data ignored the reality of experiences within schools, especially when intra-group difference was as noticeable.

The key methodological issue became how to develop a method appropriate to the central research question.

'I think the most important challenge in integrating quantitative and qualitative data analysis involves developing mechanism to ensure that you are asking sensible, meaningful and appropriately limited questions of your data sets' (Mason, 1994; p.108).

In using the quantitative data to help refine some of the selection techniques for the qualitative data, and to provide a reference point for some triangulation of the qualitative data, the quantitative aspect aimed to give the



research product a greater breadth and depth. In a sense the journey of the research design was bound up within subjectivity/objectivity debates (Eisner, 1992; Phillips, 1989). I began to question the validity of an objective 'truth' that a generalizable theory implies.

Gender identities are subjective, subject to change and difficult to measure in any quantitative sense. My solution was to discard the method of blending quantitative and qualitative data and move towards a more qualitative case study. The questions I had begun to ask of my data required an examination of issues such as how certain ideas had been generated, how practices had developed, how such ideas impinged on identities within the school, why some ideas were considered 'natural', and what dilemmas were being faced by students within the school. These questions could not be measured in a quantitative way. Neither did they result in a 'truth.' They pointed to further questions about the operation of the school, about gender identities and about wider issues for girls schooling. At the same time I was becoming influenced by the work of Bourdieu and increasingly worked towards a reflexivity about my methods that meant that I was attempting to 'interrogate and find strange the process of representation as [I] engaged in it' (Woolgar, 1988; p.27/8). Disillusionment with my initial approach was heavily influenced by the progress of the literature review. Researchers have noted that this process is one of 'constant comparison' and 'the use of [other] material was part of a process' (Ball, 1991; p.177). In short, I accepted that sex/gender cannot be seen as independent variables (Hammersley, 2001). For instance, where certain groups of boys are likely to be at more risk of underachieving than others, aggregates hide other variables, such as race or social class, that lie behind this underachievement (Haywood & Mac An Ghail, 1996; Francis & Skelton, 2001).

My qualitative case study approach provides the space for a more holistic analysis. Other possibilities can be debated and there is more likely to be a glimpse of the process through which gender identity affects aspects of school experience such as learning or behaviour rather than presenting an overview that summarises overall performance but which can potentially hide difference, uncertainty and ambiguity. Even initial notions of analysing

my qualitative data through analysing performance of different ethnic groups floundered due to a problem other research has addressed in being unable to account for difference in experience between those within categories, partly a function of our multi-cultural and complex society (Mac An Ghail, 1999).

## **(ii) Methodology: Identities and ethics**

“It is also clear...that there is no one inclusive feminist research method and in fact, feminism itself is a site of struggle over meaning...Nevertheless...imbedded in feminist research as a form of praxis is a concern about the practices and processes of research which also engages with social justice/injustice, from a vantage point which may be viewed as more (or differently) illuminating than other vantage points” (Weiner, 1994; p.128).

As the research is concerned with the experience of young women in a single-sex institution, it is appropriate that the methodology is sensitive to this experience and to ethical issues that this raises. However there are grey areas. It has been useful to discuss some of my conclusions with the staff and students involved. Such discussions have affected the way in which the data has been analysed. However it has not always been possible to give participants opportunities to review their own comments. Some did not want to reread their interview transcript. Although I have attempted to let voices emerge without seeing these voices as products of hidden forces (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) my voice is also present analysing and going beyond what they say. Burgess found that teachers did not accept her case study whilst the University of London praised it (Burgess, 1985).

Some of the data being uncovered is sensitive and simply being open about all the information collected is unsatisfactory. It can put participants in a powerless and vulnerable position. Of course all individuals are anonymous but this is difficult in the case of the headteacher. Similarly I was open about my use of a field diary but I am not sure all teachers were always aware of my researcher role in assemblies, corridors and staff-rooms. In order to minimize the ethical problems this creates a separate, more accessible document that is concisely written for the school, will also be completed.



This should allow some freedom in how the school is described in this study. In practical terms, this will make central points clear so others do not have to read it all (Delamont, 2002).

### **My own place in the research**

As the research became more qualitative I also needed to clarify my own views about girls' schools. I am Head of History/SENCo within the school. In these roles I have regularly come into contact with the students who are the subject of the study and enjoy working with them. In the sense that I seek to ensure they can fulfil their potential and achieve at the highest levels I am pro-feminist and strongly supportive of the students within the school. Yet I also have genuine reservations about independent schools and whether they appropriate resources, such as positive middle class parental support, supporting a two-tier system where state schools 'lose out' and class inequality is reproduced. My view of this school is therefore both positive and negative but hardly value-free or neutral and I must recognise and be honest about my own positions.

In a sense the decision to study gender identities has emerged from a desire to increase my own understanding of my own position and history. This has increased as I have conceptualised my own identities in terms of conflicting discourses or being differently positioned across different fields. In the introduction to my study I outlined some of the similarities/differences between the girls and myself as a researcher but concepts such as cultural capital and of gaining the legitimation through education allow me to understand how these differences are resolved through education. I occupy a contradictory position in terms of class and gender identity to those I study but as a teacher I possess the cultural capital (and am supported by discourses about how girls should behave within lessons) that has a significant value and our respective habitus can be said to be in harmony due to the common goals that recognition of this capital creates. Yet at other points habitus leads to conflict between my own values and those researched and it is interesting to examine social relationships through the influences that affect how individuals are positioned. It is through this type of analysis

that I am able to make sense of my own experience, my own career and the shifting positions I variously occupy.

Researchers have recognised that children are skilful readers of social situations and may simply say what they think a researcher wants to hear (Jones, 1996). The girls may be influenced by my identities (male, teacher, researcher etc.) or by sensing my beliefs/reservations/opinions. Tactics to minimise this were considered. The setting for the majority of interviews was in a classroom but in all interviews the tone was kept very light and the identity that I stressed was not teacher but researcher (who would preserve anonymity). I adopted a position of polite interest to every comment no matter how controversial. I was also keen to let any conversation that appeared to be free flowing continue even if it meant drifting from my own semi-structured framework. It is impossible to say whether this tactic worked but in subsequent conversations, I have been reassured that students felt that they were able to express their opinions freely.

During my initial teacher training I was influenced by the 'teacher as researcher' debate and whilst I do not know what it is like to be a girl, as a teacher of girls it is important that I fully engage in understandings of how girls experience school and, given that I have produced the knowledge about my own context, I will be more likely to internalise, review and develop this knowledge to the advantage of school, staff, pupils and myself (Stenhouse, 1975; Hammersley, 1991). It is worth making clear that a central desire is to illuminate *potential or possible* dilemmas and issues rather than attempting to 'fix' girls in a structural or subjective location (Walkerdine et al, 2001).

In utilising Bourdieuan concepts, there is a central aim of uncovering what is considered or assumed to be 'natural' and a concern with power and representation. Any debate that deals with identities from such a perspective has to acknowledge that the representation of identity itself is a problem and recognise that texts themselves are constructed (Scott, 2000). The use of a wide range of student voices and an insistence on the *potential* validity of my research is the compromise that has been arrived at to minimise the limitations. Michael argues that if 'social constructionism....rests on the



real, why not incorporate the real explicitly into accounts....and celebrate these narrative mutualities' (Michael, 1996; p.39). A key aim in the data analysis is to allow the girls' voices to be a powerful aspect of the narrative that I construct.

'There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate for others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it....but we can be honest, reflexive and open' (Foucault, 1983 in Scott, 2000; p.9).

### **Researching identities**

The methodological approach that is at work within this pilot study is an amalgam of approaches and there are elements of inductive, deductive, abductive and retroductive approaches (Scott, 2000). The initial hypothesis that underpinned the work at its initial stages was perhaps deductive, whilst what emerged subsequently was more inductive, with more attempts to link the data gathered to suitable theoretical frameworks rather than vice versa. The interview data was analysed to draw out discourse, objective referents and subjectivities (Wengraf, 2001). Participants describing earlier experiences to illustrate current dilemmas provided the retroductive aspect of the research. Within interview transcripts, objective referents could be extracted (the basic facts) but in addition wider discourses, that generated surface performance and allowed sayables and unsayables could be discerned. There was a process of looking beyond the facts to analyse how girls talked about the facts (their subjectivities). Wengraf also notes the need to look at the inter/subjectivity of the talk as subjectivity is not independent of the context and is an interplay between interviewer and interviewee (Wengraf, 2001). My voice is present within our shared interviews and dominates the analysis of their voices using notions that the participants may not themselves recognise. This is an abductive approach and my dilemma is that this process of 'going beyond' places them within a structure I have constructed and not one they would necessarily condone (Scott, 2000; p.49).

Probyn (1993) notes the need to recognise identity as a problem of representation and argues that we must carefully consider who can

realistically be considered able to speak for and whom we can realistically represent. This implies that an autobiographical approach is the manner of expressing the nature of the self most appropriately. Ideally, the autobiographical/life history method would be used within this research design as this most obviously allows the individual to speak about her/his own experience. This also gives the opportunity for the 'interconnecting and interactive nature' of different systems of oppression such as race, class and gender to be most clearly seen (Bryson, 1999; p.64). The range of such studies is immense and has articulated this interconnectedness, and issues such as the conflict between career and marriage, vividly (Evans, 1991; Steedman, 1986; hooks, 1989; Groves, 1993).

The research design attempted to take into account autobiographical/life history elements with a number of teachers and students discussing their lives and the influences on their education. Such a method lessened the potential limitations involved in adopting an abductive approach (which stresses their position within discourse and forces outside their understanding) that conceptualises the individuals as being unable to act intentionally. As students were encouraged to discuss their lives and the influences on their education their wider experience was acknowledged. I also attempted to share some of my conclusions or theories with many of the later groups and encouraged them to challenge my tentative analyses. They often did and my analysis has been heavily influenced by this feedback.

However, in considering life experiences within this research, it is important to remember that our sense of the self is also being constantly tested and performed within fields (Butler, 1990). This means that we need to go beyond what we say and how we act if we are to uncover social phenomena. It also means that the context in which the life story is produced will also have an impact upon the life story that is constructed (Alasuutari, 1997). The relevance for my study is that when I am discussing the experience of individuals, the discussion itself will inevitably shape the narrative that emerges. Again, the issue of my own position within the school and the constraints on my questioning limited the scope of some of the discussions that began to address sensitive issues. The girls' testimonies are affected to



some extent by my own life story, my own gender and my own social identities.

### **Final points**

Although it is necessary to outline methods as openly as possible it is also worth noting that Price warns against 'methodolatry....a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told' (Janesiuk in Price, 1994; p.21). The methodological journey that lies beneath the considerations that have informed the data collection and analysis has been necessary as the data was collected and as the literature review progressed. It is from the qualitative data, in particular, that themes emerged, which in turn led to the change in emphasis of the research towards issues of gender identities in the single-sex school rather than the focus on achievement. This led to a need to ensure that the type of data that was collected met the new emphasis. As new data led to new themes, the literature required to illuminate these key themes also had to change and led to new ways of thinking about the data that informed future data collection. A 'grounded theory' approach describes the manner in which themes emerged from the data and led to a focus on the girls' voices to illustrate the complexities of the impact of the single-sex school on gender identities (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Chapter eight - Methods****i) Why the case study method?**

*'The three major purposes for feminist case studies – in addition to generating and testing theory are to analyse the change in a phenomenon over time, to analyse the significance of a phenomenon over time, to analyse the significance of a phenomenon for future events and to analyse the relationship among parts of a phenomenon'*

(Reinharz, 1992; p.164).

Before I argue the case for a case study approach, it is necessary to briefly define what I understand to be educational case study research. I will then argue that my research questions, aims and theoretical stance are all in harmony with the case study approach. Examples of this harmony would include the compatibility with a pro-feminist approach, with a Bourdieuan perspective and with a microanalysis of a situation to illuminate participants' voices. Such an approach can encompass difference and can resist the categorisation of individuals into essentialist positions that may be a danger in larger scale or quantitative survey style research. Lastly I will briefly consider some of the concerns critics have raised regarding case study research, evaluate the impact of such concerns and consider their relevance to my methodological position.

There is no consensus on what makes a case study. This is partly due to the vast range of cases that have been studied. An educational case can be an individual, a group of individuals, a community, an individual school, or a series of schools, but they all look into interesting aspects of an educational situation and are conducted within a localised boundary of space and time. Case study researchers stress the importance of looking at an educational situation in context and this usually involves a consideration of ethical implications (Gillham, 2000). Bassey argues that there are at least three different types – theory seeking and theory testing case studies, story telling and picture drawing case studies, and evaluative case studies (Bassey, 1999). The first type focuses on a general issue and attempts to reach what Bassey terms 'fuzzy propositions' or 'fuzzy generalisations' after examining the context and evidence in a particular case. The notion of a 'fuzzy'



generalisation is an attempt to avoid the idea that an absolute truth can be reached. The second type of case study describes or tells the story of educational events, systems, institutions, programmes. The third type attempts to determine whether a particular programme or system is worthwhile. All three types have in common a desire to, in some way, inform practitioners, policy makers, theoreticians and/or interested audiences.

So educational case studies encompass a broad range and my own study is an amalgam of the three types presented here. It began as a theory seeking study to test the achievement of girls and boys as a function of gendered identities. There is still an element of theory testing in that gender identities have a central role within the organisation and structure of the school and students conform to and resist issues of gendered behaviour. In addition, I am telling stories, describing an institution and looking to draw out fuzzy generalisations about those within the school. I am also looking at the single-sex school as a worthwhile institution, asking questions such as whether it facilitates more powerful gendered positions. Therefore there is already a harmony between the case study approach and what I am attempting to achieve but I now turn to other harmonious links between my research and the case study approach.

Case study research is compatible with a pro-feminist position as it can play a role in challenging positivist assumptions. Traditionally research that developed along modernist and positivist lines has adopted the standpoint that scientism is the 'supra-historic, neutral enterprise...and the sole model of acquiring true knowledge' (Bleicher, 1982 quoted in Usher, 1996; p.25). This suggests that not only is there a universal ontology but there is also a rigid epistemology which alone can distinguish 'true knowledge' from untrue knowledge. However, the conceptual underpinnings of such research has been opposed by critical theory, which has sought to unmask ideologies that restrict access and, more recently, by postmodernist research that 'challenges the powerful view that there is a determinate world which can be defined' (Usher, 1996; p.25). Broadly speaking the case study approach has been adopted as the method most likely to yield the data that will hint at

the range of descriptions, the multiplicity of voices, especially those of the silenced or relatively powerless within the school.

Proponents of case study approaches also make the important point that there is a legitimate interest in particularization and they argue that there is an intellectual, logical, aesthetic and enlightening role for case study research (Platt, 1992). The case study approach is appropriate to my theoretical stance, which is a broadly pro-feminist research methodology, because it can illuminate the diversity of perspectives of students within the school. This entails the recognition of the power relations within the research process and an attempt to acknowledge the differing realities and dilemmas of those involved in this process. It is important to recognise here that there is a harmony between the case study approach and the desire to ensure no participants are exploited as a result of the research.

Some researchers have seen the case study structure as providing a means of using the most appropriate methods and theoretical constructs. Young argues that there is a need to ensure socio-historical contexts are considered in order to understand the interactions that take place within institutions:-

‘Thus in order to explore situationally defined meanings in taken for granted institutional contexts such as school, very detailed case studies are necessary which treat as problematic the curricular, pedagogic and assessment categories held by school personnel. However such studies on their own, which give accounts of the realities which emerge from the interactions of members, cannot help avoiding the socio-historical contexts in which such realities become available’ (Young, 1970; p.5).

The case study has allowed me to adopt conceptual frameworks that assist the process of treating ‘taken for granted’ meanings as problematic. Bourdieu argues that the views of individuals should be examined within their socio-historical contexts (Bourdieu, 1990a). The depth of the case study enables an uncovering of everyday meanings, knowledges, power structures and discourses. This depth is appropriate to the task of examining how gender identities are constructed within the single-sex school.



There are other practical advantages. Tseelon justified such an opportunistic approach by arguing that various frameworks and theories were seen as tools of the trade (Tseelon, 1995). Case studies allow the freedom to choose the most appropriate tools of the trade and allow the links between interactions of individuals and the socio-historical contexts of their understandings, identities and behaviours to be explored. This approach also implies that the theory emerges from the data: 'until you get in there and get hold of the data, get to understand the context, you won't know what theories (explanations) work best or make most sense' (Gillham, 2000; p.2). A more basic advantage is that a case study approach allows a researcher, particularly a part-time researcher whose case is their own institution, to be immersed in the culture, language and 'ways of doing things' on a full-time basis.

However there are critics of the case study approach. Researchers who have utilised Marxist conceptual frameworks have argued that a case study approach does not uncover the structuring practices of society. They argue this can only be examined by viewing the education system or the capitalist system as a whole. Sharp illustrates this point:-

'the study of individual schools can never be more than illustrative of a more fundamental order of structuring mechanisms which requires macro analysis' (Sharp, 1981; p.282).

A Bourdieuan solution can perhaps be applied to this issue. I would argue that case studies do allow an examination of the relationship between micro and macro situations through an analysis of structures that influence habitus and field relations of power alongside the micro relationships that are both structured and structuring. Sharp's structured macro view of schools seems overly deterministic denying the influence of individual agency. How do macro theories such as patriarchy explain the performance of girls/women who succeed? A overly macro approach seems to fail to allow for the analysis of the ways in which hegemonic discourses or entrenched institutions are themselves structured by the actions of those they seek to structure. The case study can provide an opportunity to analyse this type of interaction. This is not to deny the existence of structured societal wide frameworks but to argue that they operate differently in different localities

and through an examination of individual situations the influence of a variety of factors can be related to specific contexts.

It is my view that the case study approach allows the data collection to focus on depth and complexity and provides the freedom to use a broad range of methods. However Platt introduces a note of caution:-

‘case studies can do a whole variety of things. But some case studies do not do any of them well; and this is often because no particular rationale has dictated the choice of case’ (Platt, 1988; p.20).

Critics have argued that case studies suffer from a lack of rigour, lack a clear definition, have an anti-intellectual tenor and are overly concerned with ethics at the expense of their findings (Delamont & Atkinson, 1985). Yin notes that critics have argued case studies can be unreadable, take too long and are simply too long (Yin, 2003). Others have argued that case studies embalm a changing situation and thus provide a static, distorted view of the world (Walker, 1983). Whilst these criticisms seem valid, I would argue that they cannot be applied equally to all case studies and the criticism that they provide a static view of a changing world can be applied with equal validity to all studies whether they are case study, qualitative or quantitative. If communicating to an audience is important then it is justified that some case studies need to be written in a less intellectual manner and it is a matter of degree as to whether this manner is ‘anti-intellectual.’ I would argue as do a number of researchers that whilst case studies do take a long time, and many will be long as a result, they do so because their strength is to be able to recognise the complexity and embeddedness of social truths reflecting the discrepancies and conflicts between viewpoints (Adelman, 1980). To return to Platt, the rationale behind my study is to locate these complexities and social truths in their context.

The notion of generalising from case studies has also led to some criticism (see Gomm et al, 2000; Yin, 2003). How can a specific case represent or be of value to the general population? It can be argued that it does not matter whether any claim is made about the generalizability of findings as it is more important that findings feed into what has been termed naturalistic generalization whereby others use findings on the basis of how well they fit



into other situations (Stake, 1978). We can also return to Bassey's 'fuzzy generalisations' to counter criticisms that refer to the difficulty in generalising findings (Bassey, 1999). There are discernible discourses operating that do affect many women to some extent (debates surrounding biological determinism for instance) and case studies can contribute to a debate about how these discourses operate in school contexts without arguing they operate in the same ways for all girls. My educational case study may suggest ways in which girls face dilemmas in other single-sex schools and there may be commonalities between the experience of these girls and others in other schools. This is necessarily fuzzy because even within this school different girls see different dilemmas in different ways. There is a range of experience within the school and this will be reflected in other schools (so perhaps this idea can be generalised!). However it is undeniable that issues of gender identities for the girls in this study will be very different from the dilemmas faced by girls in different types of schools. Some researchers have noted that others would use different words and methodologies and so the unique problem of the case study is to justify one's own story and identity and good case study is patient, reflective and open to other potential views (Stake, 1975). Generalisation is problematic in any research because real life is complex and this is what case studies can show, this is their great advantage – 'the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events' (Yin, 2003; p.2).

In fact, my rationale is to move away from a generalised view of girls' experience. My central research question is to focus on themes and dilemmas faced in constructing gender identities within this school. By adopting a case study approach there is the space to highlight individual voices as well as providing working hypotheses that resist the broad, all-encompassing, superficial understandings and 'knowledges' about the operation of gender in *all* single-sex schools. Case studies that consider the issue of gender identities are of crucial importance from the point of view of social justice. Whilst it is necessary to remain realistic about the amount of change that my research will make to the lives of those being researched, it will illuminate issues that may need to be addressed and are not apparent or central within wider gender debates that can tend to stress the

overachievement of *all* girls.



**ii) The case in question: issues concerning the school**

Within the school there is not an ethos of lesson observation. This concerned me in the early stages of the research when lesson observation seemed a crucial element. One teacher commented on the fact that she had liked teaching better when it was possible to be 'queen of the classroom' without outside interference. However, only one teacher declined to be observed and I observed over twenty lessons. Access to classrooms was also aided by the approach of a school inspection in November 2001 that necessitated some acceptance that there would be lesson observation in the near future anyway. My presence was seen as a preparation for inspection in some cases and less of an alien concept in the months after inspection.

In terms of the wider debate about single-sex independent schools, many features of the school seem typical (if there can be said to be a type). As a fee-paying school, it excludes those of less prosperous socio-economic backgrounds. Within London, the fees are competitive but they are still prohibitive to many families. Researchers have noted that it is not the single-sex nature of the school but the aspirations of the parents and the work ethic of their children that makes them successful (Smithers & Robinson, 1998). Certainly there is a very strong work ethic amongst the students that gives rise to an academic atmosphere coupled with the co-operative working relationships that are perhaps indicative of common goals and shared understandings.

Obviously, claims that the opportunities for girls are enhanced will be discussed in the data analysis. Issues of identities clearly impinge upon discussions of shared understandings and co-operative working relationships. The nurturing and caring atmosphere of the school is also an aspect of school organisation that can be placed within debates about femininities. There are dilemmas for the head teacher in employing staff who can be strong and positive female role models whilst operating within equal opportunities frameworks that stress the employment the best staff, regardless of gender. The school itself has a rich history (est.1873) originating from later nineteenth century pressure to ensure educational opportunities for women. This can be discerned in the school prospectus and

in some aspects of school organisation. Society and schooling has changed vastly since the nineteenth century and my voice within the study places the school as a discursive site. It operates within debates about schooling, and women's schooling in particular, and responds to expectations about what is appropriate for girls and what girls should be.



### iii) Description of the data gathering method

The main research method was semi-structured interviewing. Initially, a wide range of data was gathered by means of student questionnaires, school records, examination results, lesson observation, semi-structured interviews, informal discussions with students and teachers, the keeping of a reflective diary and an outline of the school's purpose and objectives from the school prospectus. Some data gathering focused on the whole cohort on issues such as career aspirations, university choices, academic levels of achievement etc. Much of this data was obtained from consenting students via questionnaire<sup>1</sup>. The main quantitative data that was collected from school records was the choice of AS/A2 subjects and academic data for the whole year group such as CAT scores, GCSE results, AS results (as they become available) and lastly A2 results. They were used to assess the performance of sixth form students within the single-sex environment. Data pertaining to ethnicity, race and social class was also obtained from the questionnaire. This was used to analyse the relative performance of different groups of students within this data set. Unsurprisingly, social class yielded the greatest conformity although the use of parental occupation as a measure was not particularly rigorous. The pilot study ascertained that the school had no accurate data on race and ethnicity and, as a result, the school remedied this for future cohorts. Despite the range of data collected as the research progressed I relied increasingly heavily on the girls' voices that emerged from interviews.

With all data a process of negotiating access was undertaken with students, with staff, with the head teacher and with secretaries who were consulted about access to student records. At all stages the research design was discussed relatively openly, although often very concisely, particularly with teachers. Lessons were observed across a range of subjects and teachers received copies of transcripts. Students were aware of the broad purpose of the observations in advance and four different sixth form cohorts have been observed, interviewed and consulted in drawing out issues of identities.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for the questionnaire and a fuller explanation about the decisions regarding the exclusion of much of this data from the final data analysis.

Some data was collected from discussions with year 10 and 11 students and from general school experience and was recorded in my field notes/diary.

The interviewing took place at various points during the four-year research period with consenting students. About 76% of students who completed questionnaires consented to be interviewed. Initially, three interview sessions were completed with three different groups of students selected for mainly practical reasons but also to reflect a spectrum of age, attitude, ability and ethnicity. Two of the groups (four and three students) were year 12 (AS-Level) students and one group (of three students) were year 13 (A2-Level) students. In terms of the interviewing technique it must be recognised that, as Taylor notes: "It is personally threatening for many students to place their lives under scrutiny as their very sense of themselves is at stake" (Taylor, 1991; p.13). This was certainly a key factor behind the decision to utilise group interviews and, as an attempt to introduce a democratic aspect to the process, students had the opportunity to comment upon the transcriptions and to remove sections they were not in agreement with or felt uncomfortable with. I wanted to avoid any cases of misrepresentation where students felt they had presented a 'false self' and I was extremely wary about the potential of causing any 'harm' to students through this process (Josselson, 1996; p.69).

After the initial interviews, follow up discussions took place and the 2004 cohort were particularly willing to be interviewed. In order to reduce the influence of my identity upon the discussion that developed in the interview situations, some interviews were organised without my presence. This was successfully done in other research into the gendered talk of teenage girls where girls recorded their own general conversations and passed full tapes onto the researcher (Coates, 1999). The limitations of time upon the students in my research did inhibit opportunities to undertake many sessions but some useful issues were raised. However, even though there is an absence of my physical presence in such discussions, there still a sense in which students were aware that they are discussing sensitive issues with a 'teacher' within their school and that the tape will still be listened to. On occasion, the discussion yielded less relevant information and this technique was



frustrating as groups sometimes touched upon very interesting issues but did not elaborate. On the other hand, this technique is closer to an autobiographical approach and is perhaps a more appropriate way of giving voice to individuals and groups.

Wengraf makes an important point that the semi-structured interview has to be carefully prepared for (Wengraf, 2001). Interviews were also greatly aided by the provision of a list of the suggested points for discussion<sup>2</sup>. On a practical level, this meant that students and teachers had had a chance to think and formulate their responses. They had also had a chance to discuss the points amongst themselves informally before the interview and this was helpful. I was concerned that this approach may lead students but, on an ethical level, I felt that this gave interviewees the opportunity to withdraw from the interview, to ensure they would not be expected to provide 'knee jerk' responses that they may later have regretted, and to have a clear idea about the purpose of my interviews. In interviews with adult participants Burgess noted that 'staff at Elm Park should have been given a copy of the interview questions to think about before the interview' (Burgess, 1985; p.193). This was also noted in research involving students (Powney & Watts, 1987).

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix for these suggested discussion points

### **Chapter nine - Conclusion: reflexivity and reflection**

In talking about social science approaches, Bourdieu argues

‘The finished product, the opus operatum, conceals the modus operandi....You are never taken into the back-rooms, the kitchens of science’ (Bourdieu, 1993; p.158).

In order to open up the back rooms, I have outlined my long methodological journey. It is interesting that Bourdieu uses the term kitchens where traditionally women are to be found, often working for a male chef. I have tried to resist becoming the male chef but I have questioned whether it is appropriate for me to conduct this research at all. This uncertainty has been part of the journey from searching for ‘truth’ to an openness about the complexity, uncertainty and tentative nature of my analysis. In collecting the interview/autobiographical data for instance, there is a potential opportunity for the information gathered and given in one context to be used in a way that those being researched would not support:

‘[It] is far more difficult to devise ways of ensuring that information given so readily in interviews will not be used against the collective interests of women’ (Finch, 1984; p.83).

This is a difficulty that is compounded by the fact that as a male researcher, I do not share ‘the powerless position’ of those being researched (Finch, 1984; p.86). Bourdieu also considers the problem of meanings hidden in silences where we want to know ‘everything that goes without saying’ (Grenfell & James, 1998; p.126). A potential danger is that this is where the theorization of the subject invades the space devoted to the voices of the objects of the study. I outline what they are saying and not saying and this is fraught with difficulty.

Although the limited readership of this research reduces these problems, I accept that these voices are affected by the context in which they are produced. This is not a simple issue to resolve without careful consideration and ‘the researcher’s social relationship to the object of study is itself a necessary object of study’ (Grenfell & James, 1998; p.126). In outlining my own positionings and revealing as much as possible about the ‘sources and maintenance of one’s interest’ it can be argued a reflexive approach has



been adopted to some extent (Grenfell & James, 1998; p.126). Delamont defines reflexivity as 'the researcher recognises and glories in the endless cycle of interactions and perceptions which characterise relationships with other human beings' and whilst we can't eliminate the effects of our own position we should try to understand them (Delamont, 2002; p.8). In her reflections on her doctoral research, Rhedding-Jones noted that she considered some fragments of data for five years and the process of considering and reconsidering led to the thesis commenting 'not only on the subjective positionings and the language of the girls, but also on mine' (Rhedding-Jones, 1997; p.195). Woolgar argues for a minimization of the exotic, looking for similarities between researcher and researched and trying to 'recover and sustain the uncertainty which exists in the early stages of ethnographic enquiry' (Woolgar, 1988; p.28). The practitioner research I am undertaking in some ways brings the researched and researcher closer so echoes this anthropological approach, the social relationship between myself and the object of study is itself an important aspect of this study.

Where other researchers have handled discussions on issues such as sexuality very fully (Nash, 2003), I was always wary of abusing or compromising my position as their teacher by infringing individuals' private lives. In the pilot interviews I had selected along friendship lines and this was of great benefit so a similar pattern was employed with subsequent interviews. Some of the most interesting discussions involved very little input in terms of prompting and questioning and this freedom was certainly facilitated by their previous relationship as friends. I also believe that the mutual support and strength in numbers that a group of friends provided went some way towards providing an antidote to the position of power of the researcher. Power is an important issue that can be 'overlooked or ignored or denied' and fluctuates within interviews (Wengraf, 2001; p.46). Most students said they enjoyed discussions and I felt that this indicated that my consideration of issues of power was appropriate.

The crux of the matter is that:-

**‘The subject of scientific discourse needs to be asked the same questions that are put to the object of that discourse’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p.49).**

**In adopting a reflexive position I question how knowledge is produced and the motives behind understandings. I participate in assemblies, lessons, walk through corridors, take part in and listen to staff room conversation and am generally immersed within the institution I am studying. The term data collection suggests a deliberate and scientific process that is not really representative of the way in which data has been recorded here. It has arrived as a consequence of this existence and this thinking about identities and gendered understandings and about the application of this thinking to everyday life. It is surely inevitable that the individual way that I have internalised and analysed the data that this existence has yielded will permeate the analysis that I present here. I also accept that other researchers may construct alternate arguments (Bassey, 1999) but in doing so this refocuses gender debates on the gaps and silences that have emerged from the lack of serious analysis of middle class girls’ experience in recent years (Walkerdine et al, 2001).**



## **Section four – Data Analysis**

### **Chapter ten - Introduction: The key focus**

The central focus is on the relationship between the single-sex girls' school and the construction of gendered identities. The analysis of the voices within the single-sex school, particularly the girls' voices, is a key aspect. These voices sometimes suggest a tension between the aims of the single-sex school who desire high achieving, powerful women; and a wider society that is less emancipatory. Single-sex schools can enable girls to form powerful identities, and gain significant cultural capital, but they do not operate outside wider knowledges about women. The complexity of constructing gender identities in the face of the wide range of knowledges can only be understood through an analysis of girls' experience as they describe it.

### **The main themes**

The girls suggest a range of themes that can be discerned across the data:-

- The school and the girls appear to share an ethos of achievement and success.
- Performativity is a recurrent element and the range of performances is wide.
- An element of this performativity is the desire to present oneself through what one is not. The stress on proving they are not lesbians is particularly evident.
- Dilemmas are an inevitable consequence in the face of conflicting knowledges about how girls should be. The passive, polite, hardworking schoolgirl or the aggressive, feminist, high-achiever. The school also faces dilemmas. The headteacher may wish to present examples of powerful women teachers but is bound by legislation to employ the 'best' person for the job.
- Sexuality is 'everywhere and nowhere' in schools. The single-sex school presents itself as a haven from heterosexual pressure but must not challenge the compulsory heterosexuality expected by wider society.

- Obviously the absence of boys allows a freedom to express opinions and to perform identities unconstrained by gendered pressure. The absence of male influence can also be discerned when the girls talk about the nurturing and caring role performed out of school.
- The tension between what happens within the school and what happens outside is present in discussing issues as diverse as subcultures, the Head's dilemmas, and the school as a haven.
- There are 'good things' and 'bad things' about the way in which the operation of the single-sex school impacts upon girls' gender identities.

### **The organisation of the data**

I have grouped the analysis into chapters. Chapter eleven illustrates some of the key features of the construction of identities. It highlights the role of the girls' stories and performances showing both the freedom and constraints on the construction of identities within this single-sex school. Chapter twelve examines several subcultures that illuminate differences between girls, different types of gendered identities and how subculture membership contributes to gender identities. Discussion of these subcultures uncovers some dilemmas of femininities and sexualities. Chapter thirteen continues this focus, further examining the impact of the single-sex school on femininities and sexualities. It focuses on the tensions and dilemmas present within the school and the influence of external pressures. Gender identities and the knowledges that lead to the adoption of certain positions and the rejection of others cannot be divorced from issues of power, control and resistance. In chapter fourteen there is an attempt to illuminate ways in which the school organisation attempts to influence identities through its knowledges and structures and the impact of these on the girls' identities. Finally, several key themes are drawn together through a discussion of feminist identities and issues of career, family, marriage and children. These echo earlier concerns but highlight the relationship between the school voice and wider discourses internalised within individual habitus.



Chapter eleven – Identities**‘I don’t know how I became me’**

Jenny: I get this really weird thing where I look in the mirror and think ‘Oh my God this is me.’

Niamh: I get that.

Jenny: I don’t know how I became me. It’s really difficult to think about, like when you look at photographs of when you were younger.

[Others agree with this]

Claudia: I think it’s because you don’t ever really see yourself.

Niamh: Yeah you don’t have to look at yourself.

Claudia: Like lots of people say to me that with my sister we share mannerisms and we look alike but I don’t think she does. You can’t perceive yourself from other people’s point of view.

Jenny: It’s true you don’t have that objective thing.

Claudia: I think you could ask everyone and get a joint picture but its never going to be exactly right and so you can’t necessarily trust it.

*2005 Cohort, January 2003<sup>3</sup>*

Identities are complex. The process of developing an individual identity, as experienced by Jenny, appears to be an unconscious process, a journey it is difficult to analyse, even when there is physical evidence of this journey in the form of photographs. There is a vulnerability of the sense of the self and the implication is that identities are not fixed. Individuals often define their identities by what they are not. This is how Claudia challenges the supposed similarity with her sister (‘I don’t think she does’). Yet identities are affected by external knowledges that have created ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1973). The girls term the external view ‘objective’, implying that this makes it truer. Although ‘you can’t necessarily trust it’, it is important in maintaining a coherent ‘me’ and identities have to resolve the external knowledges against a prior internalised sense of the self. The set of ideas, principles, classificatory schemes, tastes, practices and behaviours that

individuals adopt can be termed individual habitus (Bourdieu, 1998). These girls' habitus dictate good and bad, acceptable or unacceptable, right or wrong.

Identities are impermanent and fluid. They are performed and adjusted in the light of these external views. The constructed nature of identity – 'you could ask everyone and get a joint picture' - is also balanced against the insecurity of identities, which can be subject to change in a myriad of ways. Therefore, external views are important but the individual's ability to be suspicious of any given picture, and to reject this picture, perhaps suggests how an individual can begin to resist and challenge positionings within various social contexts. However, the strength of external knowledges that dictate appropriate ways of being, appear 'natural' and they derive their strength from this invisibility and entrenchment should not be underestimated (Foucault, 1973). In this case, Claudia's is aware of the picture that is painted of her and maintains her own independence by resisting this categorisation. Her lack of faith in the external view - 'you can't necessarily trust it' – also implies potential resistance. An I-self/me-self distinction has been used to examine identities (Wylie, 1979; Lewis, 1991; Dickstein, 1977). Everything that could be described, categorized or known about Claudia is the me-self. Her own individual agency is the I-self, the self that accepts, rejects or challenges these categorisations, descriptions and knowledges. When Jenny says 'I don't know how I became me' she alludes to the social processes that can impact upon the sense of self by commenting that 'you don't ever really see yourself.' What is required is a 'fit' between the external view and the internal sense of self – between the I-self and the me-self. This stresses the negotiable nature of identity and the way it is embedded in social interactions, constantly in flux. The post-adolescent I-self is a complex self-portrait (Harter, 1999) that can reconcile the conflicting identities that emerge from the different social roles played at different times and places (Woodward, 1997).

In developing a sense of self it is not necessarily possible to be anything.

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix for a fuller context of the interviews



Elizabeth: I still think that....I don't know...I mean that going to places like the MUN[*Model United Nations*] thing and conferences to do with work and school et cetera. I still feel that I see all these huge blokes who look about, I don't know, twenty five and they're my age and I still feel that they're really intimidating and I don't really achieve the same there as I do here.

Corina: Coz all the boys I know are about six foot..... do you know what I mean?

Elizabeth: And at MUN they all were.

Annie: I don't really agree with that.

Corina: But I can appreciate that you might think that in a school environment.

*2003 Cohort, January 2002*

Elizabeth experiences the conflict between the socially constructed body (the body Foucault sees as represented in discourse) and the actual material body. The intimidation that Elizabeth feels is in part due to the actual material physical difference of the 'huge blokes.' She cannot be a 'huge bloke' yet this physicality alone does not fully explain her subsequent lack of achievement. There is no fundamental reason why older looking, 'huge blokes' should achieve better in this field. Elizabeth retreats and does not compete and this may be based on knowledges about the potentially negative effects this physical dominance could incur. Holland et al advocate a greater 'critical consciousness' about issues of embodiment (Holland et al, 1994). In this case the material body restricts the range of identities Elizabeth is willing to perform and as a result she achieves less fully. Elizabeth's experience illustrates a key dilemma. If girls are educated in single-sex schools they cannot challenge this perceived physicality and when faced with it adopt positions where they 'don't really achieve.' Yet if this was a daily experience some girls may adopt positions where they did not achieve on a daily basis.

The idea of gender identities impacting on performance occurs differently here.

Katie: We went to the Physics conference and we were like the only girls! There were hardly any girls there and we were the only girls' school.

Niamh: It was quite amusing actually.

Katie: Yeah it was.

Niamh: It made me feel proud.

Katie: It wasn't much of a problem we were all just sitting there in a conference.

Niamh: It made me feel proud because you're in a girls' school you kind of forget that Maths and Physics is a male dominated area and you are encouraged to do it. It's not like the boys are that and the girls are this so it's only when you go to things like the conference when you go – 'Oh God.'

*2004 Cohort, September 2003*

Many schools perceive a problem with the low numbers taking Physics and Katie and Niamh perceive this to be the case in other schools (OFSTED, 1996; p.13). A traditional explanation for this has been that subjects such as Science and Technology have been viewed as a masculine subjects (Head, 1989; Whyte et al, 1985; Catton, 1985; Smail, 1984; Harding, 1983). Katie and Niamh celebrate their transcendence of the gendered norm – 'It made me feel proud.' This aspect of their identity is not apparent in their daily lives – 'you kind of forget' – and it is only when it is performed that they are aware of their difference. The gendered rational/emotional duality, where women are placed in the negative emotional position, is not apparent within the everyday lives of Katie and Niamh. Their school experience is 'it's not like the boys are that and the girls are this' and this means they can construct identities that within the field of the school are not affected by gender. The single-sex school has clearly played a positive role in their freedom to adopt identities as learners that are non-traditional. Therefore within school it has become 'natural' for girls to choose subjects regardless of gender. Yet once this identity is denaturalised outside school, the identity as scientific learners appears to fall back into traditional discourses and at least some of their pride is due to their difference, and perhaps their superiority, over other non-scientific women. The logical, malestream



nature of their subject choice places them above 'feminine' choices and as such their identities are powerful in the wider field due to their non-feminine nature.

**Performances: The role of stories, narratives and myths and the context of the data**

Katie: It's like they all say you're all lesbians because you go to an all girls' school.

Jenny: But then again our school has a bit of a reputation.

Sarah: I actually don't know what is said about it.

Jenny: I've heard it said.

Claudia: I haven't really heard it said. It's not really said.

It's more kind of assumed.

*2004 Cohort, January 2003*

A central feature of the data collection is the range of semi-structured interviews that took place between Autumn 2001 and Summer 2004. Groups of students from each year group (cohort) were interviewed resulting in data from four separate cohorts of students. The extracts that feature in the analysis were grouped around certain recurrent themes. Similar themes emerged from data collected from assemblies, from teacher interviews and in lessons. A notable aspect of all the data was the role of stories that had become entrenched as myths and narratives contributing to a sense of identity and shared experience.

This extract from a discussion between the 2004 cohort is an example of the type of narrative that occurs across year groups. There is an ambiguity about their positioning as lesbian and as a school with a 'reputation.' It is a powerful myth about their group identity that they strongly resist. They certainly perceive being lesbians as negative in a culture of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Yet there is a sense of strength in their resistance of the term and casual implicit dismissal. It may be that the notoriety of having a 'reputation' is attractive. The difference here, between those who have 'heard it said' or think it is 'assumed' or haven't heard such stories about the school, shows the variety of experience in encountering

these messages. It also suggests that it is the story of the message that is an important influence in identity construction.

Gender can be seen performatively (Butler, 1990) and performance is also a strong feature of the data. Girls adopt teacher voices, voices of people outside the school such as parents or girls from other schools and they also adopt voices to portray members of the school. Performance is obviously a key part of the daily assemblies and whether students like or dislike assemblies they seem to be a memorable and significant part of their school experience judging from the regularity with which they appear in their stories. There is no fixed or essential gendered identity behind these performances, they pre-exist the performer and are socially and discursively constructed (Butler, 1990; 1993).

**Myths in action: 'They all have perfect straight hair, really pretty and they all are about seven feet high'**

Jenny: If you look at St.Thomas' girls their hair is all perfect and they are all tall.

Claudia: I mean they are nice people but.....

[Someone says 'they're not!' others say 'They are']

Claudia: Some of them are.

Jenny: They all have perfect straight hair, really pretty and they all are about seven feet high.

Niamh: That's scary.

Claudia: Are we talking St.Thomas'?

Sarah: They all have the same kind of names like Lottie and Hattie and.....

Claudia: I don't know if you can really say that because a lot of people think that St.Thomas' boys have a lot of money as well and a lot of them do but I don't think you can generalise.

Niamh: I hate the perception, because I was on holiday once, and I remember being with another family and they said what school do you go to and I told him and he said 'That was on the news wasn't it?' and I was like ....



Katie: Were we on the news?

[Someone else says no]

Niamh: And he was like 'That's a really posh school and you've all got funny accents and you all talk really posh' and it was really off-putting.

Jenny: We all do talk really similarly.

Claudia: Everyone thinks it's really posh.

Niamh: We don't have a posh reputation.

Claudia: I suppose we don't but some people think we are.

*2004 Cohort, January 2003*

This story reflects the humour that is interwoven into many of their narratives. Their talk is also riddled with disagreement, adjustment and reaching compromise. This happens twice in this short extract (on 'nice people' and then on 'posh' issue). Feminine methods of resolving conflict have been identified as placing women in powerless positions (Holmes, 1995) but other researchers have argued for closer analysis of context (Mills, 2002). Here the girls appear to be negotiating their group identities through presenting potential views, weighing these and arriving at a consensus. The stereotype is of a posh girl from a posh girls school and they place themselves in opposition to this. They don't all agree initially, then empathise with the problems of outsiders thinking you are 'posh' ('it was really off-putting'), finally arriving at a vague, conciliatory conclusion. Yet they have played out this discussion in a way that draws them together (using 'we' repeatedly). As a result they identify with what they are not even where they accept that what they are not is a construct. The fact that what they are not is their construction of typical femininity (tall, pretty, straight-haired) indicates the dilemma of identity of not being too feminine whilst retaining enough femininity to satisfy the demands of a compulsory heterosexual culture (Rich, 1980).

The performance of the boy position here is seen as totally transparent. They position themselves as the sensible side in the sensible/silly opposition (Francis, 1998) but they also recognise the hierarchy developing amongst these boys. This hierarchy is based upon success in sexual relationships.

Svetlana: Its so different with boys though because I remember this was from about year ten when we used to have a few boy mates and erm one of them...because apparently for boys it was really embarrassing if you didn't have a girlfriend, and at first it was OK but they were, like one of them, he was called Reg and all his mates were like 'Hey Reg you don't have a girlfriend yet all of us have got girlfriends' and he was like [blasé voice] 'oh yeah yeah yeah this girl she was well up for it but my chest was tight because I've got asthma.'

[all laugh]

Svetlana: It was so funny the excuses they made up.....

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

In both extracts the girls derive strength from the telling of the story and from their positioning within the stories. This maintains the validity of their identities as individuals, as girls and as girls within the single-sex school.

### **Collective story-telling: Constructing identities together**

The story-telling culture is an institutionalised integral part of the school day. This example of a 'gender' assembly is the product of the PSHE program. A small number of lessons (2 each year) specifically refer to gender issues. Each form does one assembly a year and it is noticeable how regularly gender is the chosen topic. Of the nine lower school forms assemblies in 2003/4, five assemblies concerned gender suggesting either it's importance or its appeal in that it is possible to interpret this topic humorously. It certainly appears to reflect the seductiveness of simple binary oppositions (Reay, 2001a) where boys and girls have different essential qualities and ways of behaving that can be seen through everyday situations.

#### ***Assembly – January 2004 – Extract from field notes***

A form group did an assembly on gender in front of the whole school. This began with some 'facts' about the differences between men and women – one of these was that men talk over women. At this point their form tutor (male) walked onto the stage talking over them. Everyone



laughed. What followed was then a short role-play illustrating differences between the genders in resolving conflicts. The girls who argued resolved their conflict through a manipulation of events by a third girl who engineered a social situation whereby the two other girls were forced to interact. This was done through conversation, being open about their feelings, negotiating between her friends and discussing things by mobile phone and in person. In contrast the boys group were very monosyllabic and slouched around the stage. They argued over a girl who was now one of the boys girlfriend but who had been 'seen first' by the other boy. They used slang such as 'that girl is buff' (this means attractive – a teacher asked me what it meant later) that was also very well received by the audience and perhaps got the biggest laugh. A fight resolved their conflict and they then forgot all about it – the girl was not worth it. This was incredibly well acted and the girls watching laughed the most at the portrayal of the boys [so they clearly recognised a type/stereotype]. It struck me that what was happening was that this was a (re)construction of their gender identities as girls within a discourse that presented them as superior. The security of their own identities is confirmed by their construction of themselves as not male. I later discussed this assembly with the head of year who confirmed that it was derived from work on gender done as part of PSHE.

The PSHE programme may be reinforcing the gender opposition. This assembly clearly differentiated between boy/girl behaviour. This was recognised by the audience, perhaps because it bears some resemblance to their experiences and to socially lived realities. Yet much discursively produced 'social reality' is accepted as the norm despite little supporting evidence for this reality i.e. women being worse at parallel parking (Connell, 1987). In interviews a number of girls made the point that they all know boys who are 'sweet' or 'thoughtful' or 'not like most boys.' Yet this

oppositional assembly is still a key feature of everyday conceptions of gender within the school and girls often defend girl/boy differences with some vehemence. These assemblies and role-plays appear to be important. In upholding gender dualities there is the possibility of creating a security about their own gender identities and also there is the emergence of a collective identity that frames behaviour and provides a possible repertoire of behaviours for girls. The strong defence of gender duality was commonly related to ideas of it being 'natural.' It is a powerful discourse and a key theme throughout this discussion. To deny this duality is destabilising to the identities of girls who perhaps desire a more coherent sense of self rather than a less secure conception of identity (Harter, 1999). So the positive identification with the position of the 'girl' in such role plays does serve a clear purpose yet the dilemma is that within such a duality the position marked by the label 'girl' can be subordinate or viewed as negative compared to boys' representations.

The importance of gender to their lives can be seen in the way these girls performed male identities very convincingly. In this case, there is a power and, therefore a potential benefit, in undermining male 'laddish' behaviour. The assembly places boys as 'other' and presents them as lacking skills to resolve conflict or express feelings articulately whilst girls are presented favourably. They are defining themselves through what they are not. This positive view of the gender assembly could also stress the version of femininity that is being articulated here. There is power in the forcing of the reconciliation and implicit rejection of a subordinate role throughout the assembly. But even within this role-play the presentation of girl as object/possession in the second part of the role-play ('the girl is buff') shows the tensions/dilemmas/risks that gender identities can involve. The version of girl presented here is negative and she is a peripheral concern compared to male friendship. Although the focus of this discussion is on the gendered aspect of identity, it is important to note that the biggest laugh was not related to the gender performance as much as the performance of being 'street' or using the slang language that is very alien to the school and the middle class, girls' independent school in particular. There is also an aspect of 'othering' in terms of showing boys who are working class, non-



independent school and therefore less privileged within hegemonic class discourse. Identities are not just about gender and these girls do, on the whole, possess the cultural capital to show 'good taste' and to laugh at the type of behaviours that are also held in lower status by the school (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). We can all laugh together at the otherness (and inferior behaviour!) of these boys because as members of the school we have all to some extent a shared investment in our superiority. For the male teachers watching this assembly, our identities as males become less crucial than our identities as teachers of girls and the fact that we have the 'good taste' that comes from our own privileged position within the school.

### **Identities and class**

The middle class, selective nature of this school is a key factor in identity formation. Students of high ability are grouped together and this creates a desire to succeed.

Niamh: You know what you want to achieve.

Claudia: I think there's an awareness that we're here because you want to be so you know what you have to do and if you don't do your homework you'll fail the test and your teachers will be disappointed with you and you'll be disappointed in yourself.

*2004 Cohort, October 2003*

The acceptance of the 'rules' of the classroom is part of this desire to succeed and 'you know what you have to do.' These rules are set up through the teacher (who will be 'disappointed with you'), by the expectations of parents who pay so 'we're here because you want to be', and by the state, to some extent, through LEAs or the demands of the syllabus (represented here by the notion of the 'test' that measures you). These girls have clearly internalised these values – 'you'll be disappointed in yourself.' Girls have invested in this system and recognise their role in creating their own success. This investment reproduces their success and in a wider sense reinforces the strength of existing social structures.

Yet it would be a mistake to argue that all girls accept school values just because they are middle class and that all middle class girls have similar

experiences. Gemma, a year 12 student speaking in February 2004, was certainly middle class in terms of life situation (and economic status) but because her parents lived apart and her mother worked long hours, her family life was in some ways less orthodox than a stereotypical nuclear middle class family.

Gemma: My experience is different from many people here and I think they think that I think they are snobby if that makes sense [laughs]. But I don't. Snobby is the wrong word. They just have different ways of doing things from me and my family. In many ways I have much more freedom to go out and I have to travel further across London and that gives me more independence. I think that makes it harder in school – I can't wait to leave and go to somewhere a bit more relaxed.

*2005 Cohort, June 2004*

This is an example of where habitus did not match school values and as a result Gemma found herself a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1989; p.43). Bourdieu sees habitus as 'the product of social conditionings, and thus of a history' (Bourdieu, 1990b; p.116). The habitus of girls attending a single-sex school may already be the product of social conditionings that exclude identities that will not thrive in such environments and which rely on shared understandings of what it is to be a 'girl' or a 'student' that are likely to yield successful outcomes. Gemma was often in 'trouble' for consistent but relatively minor infringements of school rules such as wearing inappropriate uniform (shirt not being tucked in, skirts too short, heels too high etc), being late in the morning and inconsistent or late homework. However, she had begun to interrogate her own identity and her position in relation to the school and her peers. This process had made it easier to identify those characteristics that she viewed as strengths ('independence') and which she recognised were not valued by the school.

Therefore, Gemma identifies with practices outside the institution of the school whereas most students at the school are more likely to be disposed to its culture through what Bourdieu terms '*elective affinities*' - they like its ideas and values (Bourdieu, 1973). She is simultaneously powerful in her



rejection of the values of the school but in a weak position as an 'outsider.' She refuses to conform to the cultural values of the school and incurs its disapproval. It has been argued by some researchers that the performance of the single-sex schools has 'more to do with academic selection, socio-economic background, and the standing of the school itself than with the segregation of the sexes' (Robinson & Smithers, 1999; p.23).

Unlike Niamh and Claudia, Gemma resists the reproduction of the school in terms of its academic message and its power over dress and behaviour. Whilst Claudia and Niamh exhibit elective affinities, Gemma resists. Ultimately this resistance was negative. Gemma left school with low AS grades. This suggests that something more than class is at play. Being a middle-class, single-sex schoolgirl does not guarantee the success upon which continued membership of this class depends. Girls such as Gemma risk 'success' by challenging rules about 'acceptable' behaviour. However her 'failure' strengthens the myth of the single-sex school as a guarantor of class reproduction. Thus class reproduction can be justified through a meritocratic logic that stresses the justice of the system (Kenway, 1990). This is intertwined with gendered notions. You will do well if you work hard, obey the rules and sacrifice some 'independence.'

### Other voices and 'accepted' ways of being

Gemma's experience suggests that there can be resistance of the types of behaviours that the school expects from its middle class clients.

Stella: Mrs Haversham has accused me of being lazy because I don't answer as much as everyone else. She says I do fine like written work and I get good marks in exams and things but she doesn't really bother with me because I won't say anything in class. And at parents evening my parents said 'Well....pick on her.' So now every time I have a lesson with her she asks me everything.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

Stella also experiences difficulties because she is a certain type of learner. Whilst parent and school views might suggest there would be a habitus in harmony, Stella does not experience it. The behaviour is the problem here -

'I don't answer as much' – not the outcome ('exams and things'). Therefore certain behaviours are outside accepted ways of being and the school operates to challenge these behaviours. Identities that are 'accepted' are partly defined by the agents of the school including its teachers.

Both Rose and Suzanne had been promoted to their pastoral posts internally (within two years of this interview). They oversee PSHE programmes and pastoral support for their respective year groups, each managing a team of three form tutors. This following discussion emerged from a second interview. For these teachers the notion of identity is closely related to the positions of powerful/powerlessness within groups.

Rose: Boys are so competitive. When I left primary school which was mixed to go to a single-sex secondary school it was so nice not to be known as swot or anything like that because I was cleverer than a boy immediately I must be a complete girly swot because I'm better than them and they couldn't handle any girl being better than them at anything and I don't know if I would have turned into a complete feminist and a lesbian if I had stayed in that environment or whether I would have just given up and stopped trying to be the best you know. Although I don't actually recall trying very hard but .....

Suzanne: Did you ever stop trying to conform, stop trying to be the best.

Rose: Well what I did in the sixth form was try very hard to be in with the cool kids and get very drunk every Saturday night so people knew that I wasn't....

Suzanne: You weren't a swot...

Rose: Yeah I wasn't a swot. I mean I might have been doing my work but I was actually out there and I was actually getting drunk on a Tuesday, Friday and Saturday and people could actually see that and they were more....

Suzanne: You whore.

Rose: No I wasn't at all. I was out getting drunk.

July 2002



Despite succeeding against boys, Rose is rendered less powerful through discourses of conformity and the idea of 'being a swot' that re-establishes the hegemonic position of the boy in this story. Researchers have argued that Foucault's conception of power allows for dominant ideologies and social positions but people do not hold power, they are differently positioned within it (Bordo, 1990 in Holland et al, 1994). What this means for women and men can only be uncovered by examining everyday habits and understandings including ways in which men undermine women's positioning and how women challenge or resist threats upon these positions. Rose resists the positioning as a swot by being 'out there' and 'getting drunk.' Even within this conversation she rejects the 'whore' label and privileges 'getting drunk' above this. This itself seems to indicate the positioning of oneself within discourses that are more socially 'acceptable.' Certainly as a head of year whose role is partly to provide moral guidance and support to girls, Rose may disassociate herself from notions that would be at odds with the type of advice the school would dispense. However the idea of 'getting drunk' is a comparatively more socially acceptable way of being. It allows her to compete in school yet to be 'cool' as a result of what she does outside it.

The result of the competition is that for Rose there is the dilemma about what is required to succeed and the fear is that 'I don't know if I would have turned into a complete feminist and a lesbian' or 'just given up' if the single-sex environment had not given her a temporary haven from this competition. This suggests that a feature of single-sex environments is the space to avoid limiting discourses and this is another recurrent theme. However, on returning to the mixed school scenario the position of power gained through resisting being positioned as a 'swot' and by switching identities and 'getting drunk' enable an identity to portray contradictions and offer a way of being that for a high attaining girl is comfortable and acceptable. Yet there is still the sense that this identity solution has been reached in response to the expectations of a male audience, under the 'male gaze' (Paechter, 1998). Where Suzanne jokes that being out getting drunk positions that teacher as a whore (she appears to be drawing on a possible response to this 'permissive' behaviour) the solution was an avoidance and a

resistance of this – ‘No I wasn’t at all. I was out getting drunk.’ There is also the hint that a negative view of single-sex environments that positioning women as ‘lesbians’ has also become an everyday, accepted view of the dangers of being educated with other girls. Even if this is not meant literally, the common understanding is allowed to pass without comment and positioning women in homosexual positions again suggests that they are being pushed into the position of ‘other’ whereby the dilemma of the single-sex school is that it may allow a girl freedom to achieve but it denies the opportunity to perform heterosexuality, supposedly the ‘natural’ position for women in discourses of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980).

The variety of views of teachers, parents and to an extent society as a whole, about appropriate schooling and ways of being for girls, is reflected in some confusion within the school about teaching methodology. The following extract was part of a whole staff meeting and was feedback from a higher profile INSET discussion.

***INSET TALK 6<sup>th</sup> January 2004***

Headteacher gave a short informative talk relaying a discussion to all heads at some headteachers inset. The point she made began that girls’ and boys’ brains work differently. She referred to research that was being done which proved this by using new MRI scans. The point was that girls used both left and right sides of the brain. There was then a biological explanation of the amygdale which is part of the brain that is stimulated and amygdale activity increases as the brain begins to function but if it experiences fear nervousness or panic the functioning of the brain shuts down. Whilst this seems to be plausible and where students are not comfortable they don’t work as well the suggestion underlying this was that girls are more susceptible to this fear/fright. Towards the end of the talk (no-one contributed, no questions were taken and no response was made by any of the audience) the headteacher appeared to undermine the initial gendered



discourse by stressing the individualism of girls ('different things will work for different people') but then said 'when I taught biology to boys I mentioned sex and it livened it up straight away.'

The headteacher has a strong point. Where students feel fearful of contributing and do not see themselves as potentially successful learners they will inevitably learn less effectively. Yet, the idea that this fear/fright tendency is gendered and more likely to occur in girls seems to imply a fixed essence of 'girl' and a biological determinism that it is difficult to support. Even if this type of behaviour were to be more prevalent in the behaviour of 'girls' it could be due to socially constructed ways of being. The dilemma is that whilst the sentiment of making girls feel more comfortable in lessons and as learners is laudable, if the myth that girls are more susceptible to fear/fright whilst learning is perpetuated then so are gendered dualities that position girls negatively. However this is balanced by the notion that boys are more interested in sex than girls. Perhaps this implies the discourse that sex is a male concern driven by biological need (Hollway, 1984). The dilemma for the head is that a girls' school should operate specifically for girls' benefit. What should it be doing to ensure it is working for them? If 'girl' as a category is socially constructed and does not exist independently of social structures and relationships there is a crisis of identity for the school. It can be argued that by existing, the single-sex school perpetuates gendered society. By catering for middle-class girls its success reproduces class inequalities.

However this dilemma can also be seen in the light of the construction of the middle class girl as the rational bourgeois subject (Walkerdine, 2001). This subject position demands high attainment and dictates an 'acceptable' path for middle class girls. Pass exams, attend a good university, and get a good job. The heads' dilemma implies a recognition of the issue of 'fear and anxiety' in a school where outstanding performances can be viewed as the norm. Achieving is the defence against becoming the 'other' and ensures the reproduction of the middle classes so achievement itself is based upon fear of losing this status. Although the head situates girls' fear and anxiety in biological terms rather than as a result of social construction, she engages

with the emotional issues that Walkerdine argued could be overlooked (Walkerdine, 2001). The dilemma is that the high achievement required to maintain this rational subject position (which is high status) requires accommodation in areas of emotion, femininity and/or sexuality. This is a dilemma that appears throughout this analysis.

A further dilemma for the head is staff gender identities.

Svetlana: Mrs Aston was talking about this the other day and she said there are too many men here.

Rachel: She said there were less and less women applying.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

The voice of the school in its prospectus is that:

- 'our students have the pick of all areas of responsibility and endeavour at all ages and stages, and see girls and women in positions of authority to which they know they can very reasonably aspire' (p.5).

Yet, the number of women in positions of authority is changing. The heads of department of History & Politics/SENCo, Drama, ICT, DT, Maths, Biology, and Music are all male as are the Examinations Officer, who also co-ordinates the Duke of Edinburgh award, and the Social services co-ordinator. This is recognised by students.

Emily: But it's starting nowadays that they are not in a minority on the staff.

*2005 Cohort, June 2004*

There are still 38 female teachers to the 14 male teachers but the visibility of the male staff as a proportion to their actual numbers may be why they are not viewed as a minority. There is also the argument that students don't necessarily see the school as a 'work-place.' Comments in the data suggest that they perceive a difference between the 'real world' and life within the school. I would suggest that many girls don't see many positions other than the senior management as positions of real authority and don't necessarily aspire to them anyway. The phrase 'reasonably aspire' also echoes the notion that notwithstanding the increase in male representation on the staff, women in girls' schools are not challenging gender inequalities where they are most powerful.



Prashianthy: I can't see any of my teachers doing well in a 'proper job.' I would hate to be a teacher at this school. They're so lame.

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

Prashianthy's point is forcefully made but suggests that the teachers here are not necessarily seen as powerful women with legitimate careers. Therefore the messages internalised by seeing women in teaching roles is more complex than is perhaps suggested in the prospectus. It also suggests a challenge against women who do not adopt more masculine approaches to work and career.

*Assembly – Autumn 2003*

The Head told a story about a girl at Harvard who complained about the lack of women teachers. They gave her a job. Then the headteacher made the point about how inspiring it was for girls to be taught by girls (which would have been fine) and then doubled-back and said 'Not that it is not good to be taught by men. I'm not getting into that.'

This is a dilemma that is clearly problematic for the senior management of the school. The head supports the position of women within teaching and work generally, yet has to balance this due to the presence of male staff and equal opportunities legislation.

**Confident identities 'evident to all'**

The school prospectus makes claims about student confidence:

'the confidence which our pupils are able to develop in a girls-only school is evident to all, and it is taken forward to university and to later employment' (p.5).

Some research has noted this (Cairns, 1990) and the headmistress agrees:

HT: Some university staff, and this is anecdotal, have said you can spot a girl from a girls' school at once, she defends her arguments, she doesn't give way, you know. You can spot someone who went to a girls or a boys school and was a winner – did Physics, took on the boys and beat them without necessarily meaning to and you can

spot the ones who just never had chance to speak and they don't start now.

*March 2003*

However, this seems dependent on viewing oneself as a 'winner.' Niruja, a year 13 student interviewed in the Autumn 2003, is one of a number of girls who would dispute this claim.

Niruja - 'If anything it has knocked me'....'I feel really dumb around everyone else' ..... 'a particular department has knocked my confidence.'

*2004 Cohort, May 2003*

Niruja relates her lack of confidence to a perceived lack of academic ability and in her case it is this that imbues certain students with confidence not the girls' school structure. In fact, the fear and anxiety felt by Niruja (who passed all her GCSE's with grades A\* to B1) reflects the success of the normalising of academic achievement. However the view that girls' schools do improve confidence can be discerned in parental understandings of the single-sex school effect. Stella echoes this view.

JM: Why did your parents select this school?

Stella: My dad said it was because he thought it would make me confident and more articulate.

JM: And has it?

Stella: No.

JM: Well you are articulate.

Stella: But not confident [big pause] I always think that everyone will laugh at me. There are just always louder people in my class who always get things right. And yeah they would always talk a lot and I suppose that I thought compared to them I don't really matter much.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

Again there seems to be an academic aspect to the issue of confidence. Some people are able to gain confidence but according to students interviewed this effect was certainly not universal. The environment is still competitive and a certain capital, whether it is academic ability or confidence to overcome the fear of everyone laughing is required to succeed in this field. Even if this fear is overcome or this capital acquired, this



confidence may not be permanent or transferable across different fields. Even with other girls this confidence is undermined. Stella is amongst the most academically gifted students in her year group but her lack of confidence stems from not being 'louder.' The traditional discourse of the hardworking, quiet girl is not 'acceptable' here and suggests the single-sex school does not always create confident successful girls with high self-esteem, accept a range of academic identities, or resolve dilemmas about what constitutes successful learning (Kenway, 1990). In some instances confidence is a more transitory entity than the prospectus suggests and the single-sex school identity is less of a benefit than might be expected.

Natasha: You walk through Ealing and people like swear at us for no reasons, if we're wearing our school uniform.

Prashianthy: Yeah it's like rude girls who go to other schools. They frighten me. They seem so confident.

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

The idea that the school provides confidence clearly seems field and context specific. Whilst we recognise that being confident has a value, being confident academically does not transfer to other fields (i.e. not in the town centre) and the type of confidence exuded by a successful student at school can inhibit others and may carry the negative identifications that can be used by other groups ('rude girls'). Whilst we recognise here that confidence is an important aspect of future success it is less clear whether this confidence is actually gained by all girls and how transferable this confidence is. 'Rude girls' still dominate them outside of school and they lack confidence in such groups. A class element is apparent here. Middle-class girls recognise the symbolic power of academic confidence and achievement but it only endows them with power when it is recognised as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1990b).

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to introduce some of the ways identities are negotiated and to begin to draw out some of the regimes of truth (Foucault, 1973) that impact upon these girls. Within a single-sex girls' school it must be acknowledged that wider cultures have as large an impact on identity formation as the culture within the school and that they get gender identity

from everywhere (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). However, if the identities that are formed unconsciously within schools reflect the values of a patriarchal, masculine society through internalisation of supposedly objective views there will be a reproduction of inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977b). Discussions about identities concern issues of knowledge and power. What is considered a valid way of being rests upon the legitimacy of various positions in relation to other less valid or possible positions.

‘The struggle for identity, the means to represent oneself to others and to self is actively produced within structures of power, within constraints and the bounds of possibility and available ‘cultural repertoires’ (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; p.116).

Girls’ identities are constructed through their performances and in relation to what they are not (Kenway, 1990). They are also shaped by the values and everyday common sense understandings of their social worlds. Some girls challenge these values and understandings whilst others support their reproduction.



**Chapter twelve – The Vultures and Subcultures****The vultures**

It was obvious to the girls that subcultures existed within school and were clearly evident in the spaces outside of lessons such as in the time spent in their common room.

JM: A lot of people on the questionnaire talked about cliques and gangs?

Corina: Have you been in the common room?

[some laughter]

JM: I've been in the common room.

Annie: Have you noticed?

Corina: OK go in the common room here [points] and there is kind of the Helen group with Niralee and them lot. Here is the vultures with Vita [Annie chips in - unclear].

JM: The vultures?

Corina: Ania, Raquel. People that are just too cool for everyone else.

JM: Right

Corina: And then there's us. We just sit there in the middle having a jolly time.

JM: What are you?

Annie: We're sort of in the middle.

Corina: We don't really have ...we're the clique surfers.

JM: Clique surfers? [laugh]

Corina: We're not cool enough to be in the other group.

Annie: I think we're sort of in the middle.

JM: In the middle, clique surfers.

Annie: We're the sad group.

JM: Why do you call that other group the vultures?

Corina: There isn't really a sad group.

Annie: No there isn't really.

Elizabeth: There kind of is.

JM: Who's the sad group?

Corina: People who in year 11 were the kind of people wearing chains and lip-gloss. Then you have people who actually do work and then the people that sit are the vulture vultures who just can't forget that you were once sad. It's just so pathetic. You'd think that by sixth form you'd have worked out that what you're like is not based on how important or how hard you work.

Elizabeth: I sometimes think that what would happen if I went and sat in that area.

[Laughter]

Corina: You should. It would be so funny.

JM: Why do you call them the vultures?

Elizabeth: We don't its just ....

Corina: Well they are so like a separate entity. It's like you talk to them they just look at you.

Annie: And they have a speciality in blanking you like you don't exist. It's like they will ask people one thing probably in your whole school career and for the rest of it they will pretend.....

Elizabeth: That you don't exist.

Annie...that you're not actually there. Unless you do something that shows that you are.....I don't know.

Elizabeth: In lessons it's not too bad.

Annie: Yeah in lessons its fine. Yeah in lessons or outside activities it's fine.

Elizabeth: Out of school activities?

Annie: No no in school activities.

Corina: I walked past Lavinia in the street the other day and I went 'hi' and she just [did an impression of someone being haughty].

[Laughter]

Elizabeth: That happens so much.

JM: Why is that do you think?

Annie: I don't know.



Corina: It's because they think of themselves as the most mature people but they're showing themselves to be the most immature people they cannot relate to people that are not in their little group.....

Annie: [laughs] Not in their own sphere.

Corina: [laughs] It's so pathetic.

JM: Do you perceive that happening within other years within the school?

Annie: It's exactly the same in year 11.

JM: Year 11 is the same is it? What about the year above you?

Annie: The year above us is....

Corina: The year above us are actually really good.

Annie: They've always been really good and bonded.

Corina: And they're really brainy and they all kind of work together.

Elizabeth: But they always said that once you get to sixth form kids do get on better and it happened in my sister's year but in our year it's just not happened.

Corina: I don't know it seems really funny though because like I don't know sometimes you feel like you would want to talk to other people but you stick to your own people. It's strange, I don't know.

*2003 Cohort, January 2002*

What defines the vultures is vague within this extract but as a social group they are 'cool.' This coolness impacts upon their identities and limits them to their 'own people' unable (from Corina's point of view) to relate to other people. There is a sense that such relations would be beneath this group so they position themselves as unwilling to relate – 'they are so like a separate entity.' For the vultures, it seems there is nothing to be gained from interaction and there is a hierarchy based upon what you are ('cool') and what you are not ('sad'). Although both Corina and Annie say that there is no 'sad' group Elizabeth says 'there kind of is and the 'sadness' is performed through inappropriate choices ('lip gloss and chains'). The sense of inappropriateness is an arbitrary position but defined by these non-vulture

girls who can recognise what makes the vultures cool but who do not have access to this hegemonic subculture. Coherent identities are maintained and performed according to what is acceptable within a certain subculture.

Elizabeth later acknowledged that it was 'difficult to sum them up' but that broadly speaking they would go out at the weekend, often with older [male] friends, drinking, listening to hip hop/ R&B/ dance type music, wearing more revealing clothes and, in most cases, smoking. Part of the vultures' strength came from the perception that they were confident with boys/men and this echoes research, which has argued that girls partly 'define themselves in terms of their positions in the heterosexual market' (Barrie, 1993; p.170). In Barrie's research, students were aware of different status groups within school and heterosexual positionings were one way of distinguishing between groups and individuals' identities. However, Barrie stresses the pressure girls were under to define themselves in this way. The self proclaimed 'sad' group certainly recognised the potential of such pressure and recognised the benefits accorded to the vultures but they resisted this as the only way of being, having a 'jolly time' or dismissing some of the performance of being a vulture as 'pathetic.'

Despite defining themselves as 'clique surfers', Corina, Elizabeth and Annie are socially and physically outside the vulture territory and note that they cannot enter the vulture territory. Despite wondering what would happen if they did sit in this area, the apparent impossibility of the 'funny' idea of transcending the subculture indicates its power over the actions and identities of these girls. Despite their ridicule of the structure of their experiences ('You'd think that by sixth form you'd have worked out that what you're like is not based on how important or how hard you work'), it is clear that 'what you're like' is still based on perceptions of 'sad'-ness that is partly connected to academic propensities. There is an openness about these differences but there is also a resistance to the idea of being able to transcend social groups – 'you stick to your own people.' In turn your identities become defined by 'your own people.'



However the comment 'in lessons it's fine' supports the shift in identities in-school and outside-school. In some fields (common room/ outside school) vultures perform as though they are rejecting the hard working ethos of the academic school, recognising that this is not cool. Yet they do work hard privately. The vultures' behaviour overlaps with hegemonic masculinities that position being studious as feminine so it is crucial to do well without working hard (Martino, 1999) – this is linked to 'being cool.' Eventually these tensions may cause problems. They have to be everything and nothing to maintain this position. The mind/body split where girls are expected to develop sexual identities (body) whilst simultaneously being rational learners (mind) is also part of their dilemma (Epstein et al, 2003). However I did not observe the extreme outward signs of tension that some researchers have noted (Walkerdine et al, 2001; Lucey, 2001) and perhaps this is due to the space in lessons to adopt a pro-school work ethic.

Whilst it has been argued that for working class children the refusal to compete that was implicit in their counter-school culture was a radical act, a refusal 'to collude in its own educational suppression', it is difficult to argue that the vultures are resisting suppression in the same way (Willis, 1977; p.128). The 'lads' Willis identifies have a sophisticated understanding of the myths society propagates to ensure the maintenance of the legitimation of the class system and reject them by non-conformity. These girls reject full conformity but are clearly privileged in terms of socio-economic background. By rejecting part of the expected conformity to the schools values (diligence, passive obedience, culture of the school above youth culture, denial of certain freedoms for wider freedoms later) they adopt identities that offer an alternate value system and, for now at least, more powerful ways of being.

Such subcultures are not always so powerful in every cohort though and the situation was different in the 2002 cohort (who as a result were widely seen as a 'good year group' by teachers).

Amina: Really [surprised]. All the causers of conflict, who were like stirrers and bitchy they've gone and it's strange, it's so convenient but it's weird.

Zoe: I wonder if it's because bitchiness makes them unhappy and they've gone.....

Gabrielle: But they cause it.

Amina: They could have stopped it.

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

Those who were 'stirrers and bitchy' (this is how the vultures were seen by several girls in the 2003 cohort) had been marginalized. They are characterised here as 'unhappy.' They have become the 'sad' group! In this case the subculture has been overcome by more pro-school elements and the resistance of school by these 'causers of conflict' has reached a more extreme conclusion. Rather than resist from within, like the vultures, they left. This suggests that the vultures' position of hegemony is not assured and there is a power struggle between various groups that is played out through social experience. 'Bitchy' behaviour is one way this struggle manifests itself.

### **Finnegan's crew**

In the 2005 cohort, the arbitrary hegemony is gained by acceptance into the 'Finnegan's crew' who are referred to in a very similar way to the vultures.

JM: What sort of groups are there?

Theresa: Well you've got Chrissy and Aliya and people like that.

Rachel: And Samantha.

Theresa: They always sit over by the windows.

Svetlana: The Finnegan's crew.

JM: The Finnegan's crew.

[Yeah = all agree]

Theresa: There's like the boffins and then there's like people who have no friends.

[General talking about this for a second or two]

Rachel: There's also like Jamira and Sareeka and all that.

Svetlana: Definitely. The rock crew.

JM: What group are you in?

Theresa: I'm neutral. I can sit with Aliya and all them lot but I like everyone.



Svetlana: But you couldn't just go and sit with them or with anyone. Let's say if you were new you would have to sit somewhere neutral first before you could kind of introduce yourself and if you were a nice person you would be able to join in.

Theresa: I don't mean to be mean but I don't think Yashmi has got any friends. She is never in the common room, and I think this is why she is never in the common room, but if she was it would be so apparent that she has no friends.

Svetlana: It's true I've never noticed her.

Rachel: No, she's friends with Alice actually.

Theresa: I always try to talk to her and if you start conversations with her she always has so much to say but she would never say 'Hi' to you first.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Like the vultures, the 'Finnegan's crew' are defined by their external social activities. This dictates their status within school. They also have a territory 'over by the windows' (arguably the nicest place to sit in their cramped common room) and adopt a similarly aloof position regarding other groups such as the 'rock crew' or the 'boffins.' Yet the idea of being a 'clique surfer' or being in the middle returns here (Theresa: 'I'm neutral'). This attempt to position oneself both within and outside of cliques was a recurrent theme and both Theresa and Hannah (a member of the Finnegan's crew) stressed their ability to transcend their immediate groupings. This reflects the risk involved. Loss of status of a particular sub-culture results in a negative positioning for all those who are identified as belonging to that particular culture so it pays to be tentative about fully committing to a certain group. Yet at the same time, those who are isolated outside all the groups are defined by this (Yashmi) and pitied. There is an invisibility about those who are outside of this system of groups – 'It's true I've never noticed her' – as Yashmi has absented herself from the common room. It is not that she is without friends, but she is perceived to be, as she is not identified as being within a larger defined entity. Whilst Hannah partially denies her own position in the Finnegan's crew, she is identified as being a key member of the clique by others in a previous interview where she was not present and is

aware that part of her identity is connected to this group ('people would assume I'm part of the Lily, Ella, Samantha, Chrissy....').

Hannah: Personally I feel I'm one of the least cliquiest people because although we have a strict...like technically I'm part of a certain group.

JM: What's that group like? What's your group?

Hannah: I think people would assume I'm part of the Lily, Ella, Samantha, Chrissy....

Svetlana: The Finnegan's lot.

Hannah: Oh my God I hate Finnegan's I don't go there any more. I went there when I was about fifteen and you can't get in anywhere else.

JM: So you don't go there anymore – but you lot were the Finnegan's lot – so are you a clique?

Hannah: I think am one of the least cliquey people though because I have no qualms about social status.

JM: Do some of them then?

Hannah: Yeah definitely.

JM: In what way?

Hannah: They will sit in a certain part of the common room and they won't talk to certain other people.

JM: Why not?

Theresa: Because they're immature.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Theresa challenges the hegemony of the Finnegan's crew here by invoking a version of the sensible/silly dichotomy that has been used in examining boy/girl oppositions (Francis, 1998). By labelling them as 'immature' she introduces an alternate way of interpreting their performances. Hannah, as a member of the crew (albeit one who no longer goes to this pub any more) recognises that the group is concerned with social status. Their identities are based upon whom they talk to and where they sit. The fact that they have been nicknamed after a pub they have clearly outgrown is another subtle means of undermining their status. Other groups, due to being closer to legal drinking age, can now access 'O'Neill's, Hogshead or the Haven....proper places.' Again, subcultures are products of histories and these histories are



reassessed in daily experience by the vultures who recall 'lip gloss and chains' and here by those who undermine the 'Finnegan's crew.'

### **Contradictions and dilemmas of identities within subcultures**

The means of access to the 'Finnegan's crew' is as vague as with the vultures. Clothing is an important signifier of identities and of subcultures (Swain, 2002).

**Stella: I suppose they wear more revealing clothes.**

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

The revealing nature of clothes is the uniform of the subculture here. Being 'revealing' is not without risk. The symbolic, rather than physical, risk is perhaps implied in the slightly recriminating tone Stella adopts. The freedom to adopt a position where they can wear revealing clothes is supported by Svetlana but seen as unnecessary by Emily.

**Svetlana: Yeah if you saw them out of school they'd be wearing the same thing. I think it's just their style and they're wearing that because they want to.**

**Emily: I do find it annoying though because there are times when you really don't want to see people arses.**

**That's all you can do 'I don't want to see this. Will you put it away.' You're in a girls' school who are you trying to impress?**

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

Emily defines herself outside the need to reveal or perhaps conform to this version of femininity particularly as the implication is that revealing clothes are for impressing men. Yet your behaviour cannot go too far or look too artificial.

**Hannah: They go there and they just talk to everyone because you have to look popular, they have to have people around them and I don't agree with that. It should be just you and your friends and you don't have to pretend anything so....**

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

If you seem to be trying too hard, then the position within the Finnegan's crew is under threat. Membership of a group is not assured and there are

constraints on how far a person can be seen to (over-)perform a role. This is very arbitrary but there is obviously an element of competition based upon rules or norms (Frazer, 1993). Where this performance results in a boyfriend who is admired by the group there is a clear benefit and more assured membership within the group.

Hannah: When Fiona started going out with Garry I think that really propelled her because he is really nice and really popular and like the ring leader of the boys' group and then Fiona started going out with him and she got really popular.

Theresa: I think at that year ten age it made you look really popular but it died out after that. The thing is if you get offers of a boy friend and don't take up that offer that's fine but the problem is if you don't get any offers [uses blasé voice] 'Yeah I really want a boyfriend but I can't get one.'

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Yet even here popularity is not always derived from success in the heterosexual market. In some ways the risk is that you can lose status by 'doing certain things too fast.' Even the popularity (and power) Fiona derived can be challenged. Emily undermines this notion of popularity by arguing that popularity should be about numbers (and the implication is that if popularity is about numbers from within the school it is also independent of boys/men).

Svetlana: [asks Emily] Who would you consider to be your group? I mean I don't really look at who is doing what.

Emily: [Outlines her own group] But there's actually a load of us and we say we're not the popular group but we are. There's about sixteen of us and it bothers the hell out of me because it makes us seem small and little and insignificant but actually we're not and we're a massive group of people all joined together. [Talks about how this group has come together].

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*



Emily's attempt seems to be a conscious attempt to escape the reality of being 'small and little and insignificant' and as such she attempts to redefine the values upon which hegemony should be based. This behaviour suggests that there is an active struggle taking place and the values that lie beneath knowledges about ways of being are dynamic, pliable and open to change.

Svetlana, who first used the 'Finnegan's crew' term, explains to Emily why this re-labelling challenges notions of power/popularity.

Svetlana: I don't call them the popular group. I call them the Finnegan's crew.

Stella: There's a few groups I won't talk to. I won't talk to the Chrissy group. [*Chrissy is part of the Finnegan's Crew*].

JM: Why not?

Stella: I don't get on with them and I feel they sort of look down on me.

Svetlana: But Chrissy always talks to people.

Stella: Yeah it's not so much Chrissy it's like Lara she thinks she's like better than everyone else. I don't know why it's just the way she is with everyone else.

Emily: It's her attitude. She doesn't go round proclaiming that she is better but her attitude is 'I am better' the way she talks to people. She is patronising. And she can be quite fake. I've been here for so long since year one and I've been friends with most of these people at some point. I mean I was good friends with Chrissy at one point – we don't speak anymore. Although I speak to anyone who speaks to me I still know people who I won't speak to at all.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

The disharmony apparent between certain groups is complex and the reasons are not simple. However, the dilemma of identifying with a certain group is that this requires an investment and this investment is challenged if the values of a group are not upheld and seen to have some worth. Seen in

this way disharmony within school is a function of the struggle for a coherent and appropriate identity that, at least in part, depends upon group status. One way a 'sad' group can maintain relative status is through undermining the status of 'cool' groups.

A recurring theme from the girls' comments was that the school is 'bitchy.' However this term is heavily gendered and similar behaviour from boys would be labelled competition (Francis, 2000). It is compared here with the notion that 'boys sort it out with a punch.'

Natasha: The girls are quite bitchy. I don't think you get that in more normal schools.

JM: Bitchiness?

Natasha: Yeah in girls' schools.

Jamini: In any girls' school. Mind you there's quite a lot here.

Prashianthy: I reckon it'd be less bitchy in a boys' school.

Natasha: Oh yeah definitely.

Stephanie: No because people would be bitching about other girls like with all the competition with boys.

Prashianthy: Yeah but I don't know....[pause]

Jamini: Boys might be bitchy.

[laughter]

Natasha: They sort it stuff out with a punch.

[laughter]

JM: How do girls sort it out?

[Laughter]

Stephanie: They slap each other.

Natasha: They have bitching matches.

Stephanie: We've had some slaps.

Jamini: They've been quite funny though.

JM: So they're not seriously physical?

Prashianthy: Yeah sometimes.

[Unclear – some discussion of previous incidents]

Natasha: Someone scratched K\_\_\_\_\_!

[Agreement – unclear]



Natasha: And the other week someone slapped someone else.

Stephanie: And Z\_\_\_\_ and one of the twins, not our Z\_\_\_\_, Z\_\_\_\_ in the year above, they had that really massive fight.

Natasha: Really?

Stephanie: Don't you remember?

Natasha: Shall we fight? [laughs]

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

There is a physical violence here that is not so dissimilar from boys' behaviour but it is framed as a specific 'girl' type – scratching and slapping. Humour is employed at the end to move themselves away from the notion of themselves as fighters and the fights themselves are seen as being 'funny.' This is perhaps an attempt to suggest such behaviour is not threatening to their identities as girls i.e. they do not physically fight. The idea of 'bitching matches' seems to be relegated beneath the boys' method of resolving conflict. The use of humour and language suggests that physical fighting is a position they are prevented from adopting but which is preferable to their 'bitchy' approach.

Theresa makes a similar point.

Theresa: [unclear] Things that happen at our school wouldn't happen at boys' school. Girls are more like....It's more obvious at a boys' school. Like if you don't like someone...you'll just have a fight whereas if you don't like someone at a girls' school it's bitching.

Svetlana: In girls' schools it's more mental torture.

Theresa: Yeah.

Svetlana: I don't know my friends who are boys they don't understand why somebody is annoyed by somebody because they talked behind their back. They just solve it all by just fighting it out.

Theresa: But girls fight as well but not at our school.

JM: There must be instances in your school time when somebody had a physical fight?

Theresa: Well not in school but outside of school. It happens all the time at the weekend. [In an exaggeratedly feminine voice] 'Ooh what are you looking at? Get away from my man!' that sort of thing.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

This boy they describe is not just arguing that he does not understand bitchiness. He is trivialising the need to be upset if someone talks about you. This would denote femininity and is therefore a negative signifier within his own field of experience. The masculine/feminine opposition that this draws upon is evident in his statement. Some girls do fight. Yet even when girls do fight it is performed here as being comic, caused by interactions with men and something that 'would probably only happen if you were drunk' (Svetlana). 'Bitchiness' appears within girls' accounts as a method of dealing with conflict, a term for competition, defining one's own identities by what one is not or a means of increasing one's own status within a group at the expense of others. From my own experience, 'bitchiness' is not exclusively female and Jamini appears to suggest that this is possible – 'boys might be bitchy.' The label 'bitchy' is a gendered way of undermining women given that similar performances by men would be less likely to be described in this way. The idea that boys 'fight it out' in a way that is less duplicitous, quicker, and less painful may also be a myth and the acceptance, and even glorification, of boys' aggression is disconcerting. In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, girls appear to hold the view boys are best (Reay, 2001a).

The vultures and Finnegan's crew are both viewed as the 'popular' groups within their respective cohorts. Both these groups are seen as popular partly due to their ability to succeed in fields outside the school and to resist school values. Their identities enable them to resist criticisms levelled at other girls with more pro-school stances. Those girls who conform to school values and expectations can expect to reap the benefits of the school and educational reward system. But outside the field of the school they are less privileged and face harassment off other girls.

Stephanie: They think we're snobby.

Natasha: They think we're lesbians.



Prashianthy: Snobby, slutty, lesbians.

Stephanie: They call it Snotting Hill.

Natasha: Do they?

Stephanie: Everyone in their school calls it Snotting Hill.

Natasha: You walk through Ealing and people like swear at us for no reasons, if we're wearing our school uniform.

Prashianthy: [shocked] Really?

Natasha: Well it hasn't happened to me but it's happened to other people.

Prashianthy: That's so rude.

Natasha: My friend Esther, you know Esther and Karla they were out together walking and some girls came out and just started swearing at them saying 'Oh look at you in your nice little uniform from your top school' and just walked off and shoved one of them.

Prashianthy: Some people from my old school have said things to me.

Natasha: To you?

Prashianthy: Well no. They've said them to other people who've told me.

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

These stories and performances are oft repeated amongst the girls and have become myths by which they develop their identities. Through rising above such harassment they are not what their aggressors are – 'rude', abusive, crude, physically threatening – they are the subject and resist the definitions placed upon them by undermining these 'rude' girls. Yet it does not happen in daily experience but 'to other people who've told me' and it is the power of the stories that allows them to position themselves more favourably.

### Conclusion

The voices of girls suggest that identities are constructed and maintained through shared positionings within subcultures. They are linked to narratives and stories about what different people do (and are therefore like). The mechanism for these stories is often defined as 'bitchiness' (Keise, 1992). Girls who do not display the 'correct' behaviours in terms of

the values of particular groups are 'othered.' This reduces the status of rival identities and gives coherence to both individual and group identities within a particular group. Group identity is not simple and there is a marked dilemma in membership. In the 'popular' groups such as the vultures or the Finnegan's crew girls can be positioned as aloof or superficial or inappropriately clothed and so on. Even the nickname 'vultures' and 'Finnegan's crew' have some negative connotations that undermine the relative status of these groups. Power is never certain and what is advantageous cultural capital in one field can quickly become less important in another. Behaviours do overlap and the vultures can adopt pro-school hard-working identities in some spaces within the school. There is no pattern in terms of external examination results that suggests any particular group achieves more significantly. Girls recognise the capital that will accrue as a result of investing in school values within lessons but vultures resist this identity in other fields. This struggle over capital and meaning in different fields is a significant aspect of the construction of identities and linked to versions of femininity and masculinity, competition and sexuality present within the school.



**Chapter thirteen – Feminine and Sexual Identities****Feminine Identities: The space to be what we want to be**

An argument for girls only learning environments is that in mixed situations the attention seeking boys dominate teacher attention and resource allocation generally and/or girls adopt submissive and withdrawn positions 'to impress [boys]' at the cost of their own intellectual and social development. Girls 'play safe' (Brutsaert, 1999; Shaw, 1995). The single-sex school protects girls from this (Heyward, 1995; Weiner & Arnot, 1989). The single-sex environment certainly appears to be operating in this way. Students believe they have space to take risks and create their own identities independent of the need to be 'on show' in lessons.

Stephanie: No no no. Sometimes girls don't answer in front of boys because they are trying to impress them and they don't want to feel .....like ...well.....on show [?

Unclear]

[A few others nod in agreement here]

Prashianthy: Yeah I'm sure you're right.

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

However, Stephanie has been at the school since she was seven. She may have come to this understanding through the views of parents, school or friends in mixed schools. She is free from being 'on show' whilst within the school and this provides a freedom.

Claudia: The thing is with a girls' school with assemblies and things like that we can behave more freely. Like we would never have done our one with boys in the audience.

Niamh: Yeah I was like a farmer Giles and I would, well I probably would have done it anyway but for some people it makes a big difference.

Sarah: I wouldn't have done that.

Jenny: Why not?

Niamh: I think you would be more likely to be judged, not even by the boys necessarily but maybe by the girls.

Jenny: Why don't we judge though? Because we don't do we?

Niamh: I don't know I think it is because we are like a big family in a way and it is like an extension.

Jenny: Is that because we are all girls though?

Claudia: I don't know.

*2004 Cohort, October 2003*

Niamh suggests girls police their own behaviour in mixed environments but the single-sex 'big family' atmosphere allows them to take on Farmer Giles type roles. When Jenny questions whether this is because they are all girls she implicitly questions the assumption that the 'big family' is female (and consequently caring and supportive). These girls are able to adopt more varied positions and seem aware of issues of their identities at a sophisticated level. However, this sophisticated stance is tentative and partly unconscious. They don't quite know why they can 'behave more freely' just that they can. This is part of the sophistication of identities and shows how habitus, capital and field operate. They can adopt positions within the single-sex field that would not necessarily gain them capital with 'boys in the audience.' They also seem to share a positive view of the 'big family' and enter the single-sex field with a shared understanding of what it is to be in a supportive, family environment. Habitus is in harmony with the behaviours encouraged in this field and there is recognition of the cultural capital to be gained from behaving 'more freely.' The spaces within the school are also available for the girls to claim free from potential colonisation by boys. They can perform in assemblies, use sports or ICT facilities, and are not limited to a tenth of the school grounds (Thorne, 1993).

### **Freedom from distractions: The sexless school**

JM: Are there any benefits of it [the school] being single-sex?

Elizabeth: Hmmm. Basically there's less distraction.

Chelsea: *[In teacher voice]* That boys and girls will lead to distraction.

Annie: There's less distraction and less competition.

JM: There is competition here though isn't there?

Annie: But it's academic competition.



JM: Right.

Chelsea: Yeah. Rather than whose got the best hair.

Elizabeth: Or who's got the best boyfriend.

*2003 Cohort, January 2002*

The freedom from 'distraction' is a key justification for the single-sex school (Bryk et al, 1993). This discussion suggests they construct identities that are 'acceptably' competitive. 'Acceptable' competition is academic rather than about the 'best hair' or 'best boyfriend.' It is the introduction of boys that would make hair an issue worth competing about. The absence of boys gives the girls respite from this competition. The use of the teacher voice to present this argument denotes that it is the 'school voice.' Chelsea recites the school view in a monotone suggesting it is something they have heard many times. All three endorse the argument though. The single-sex school operates to position girls outside of discourses of competition for boys. Introducing boys would mean they would be forced to compete in a non-academic manner. Furthermore, the competition would not be with boys, but with each other over boys. They recognise the weakness of this position and adopt a slightly mocking and disparaging tone to indicate the problem. The position of power that they envisage would emerge within girl groups depends on 'the best hair', on having a man, and therefore on the signifiers of sexuality that give power within a have/hold discourse (Hollway, 1984). Competing over boys is clearly not an in-school issue. The dilemma for girls is whether to compete for boys outside of school. Fiona of the Finnegan's crew discovered it is worthwhile competing for men and in terms of her popularity it 'propelled her' but the risk is overdoing the competition or failing to attract men. As Theresa said 'the problem is if you don't get any offers.'

The theme of the school as removing distraction is present in Natasha's story.

Natasha: There was this thing, Mrs West said in assembly once where this girl who moved from our school to Lantern School and she lived nearer to Lantern, then everybody was like 'Oh that's so she can get up later' but

she said 'No I have to get up earlier to get my make up on because there are boys at the school.'

Stephanie: They put make up on here. The year 9s!

Natasha: Yeah but you put more on. Imagine what they'd do if there were boys here.

Stephanie: You wouldn't see their faces. [laughs]

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

The fact this tale originates from an assembly shows again the use of the collective stories through which the school presents acceptable versions of femininity. Through their acceptance of such messages girls construct 'acceptable' identities. A girl whose focus is on academic study not make-up is the ideal and this echoes the acceptably competitive identities outlined by Annie's group above. Stephanie humorously stresses the impact boys would have on the year 9s. Their 'real' 'natural' selves would be hidden under a 'false' identity created for the purpose of attracting boys. She does acknowledge that the school does not completely remove the use of make-up but their rejection of make-up, and the idea of constructing identities for boys, is strenuous. These girls appear free from distraction and thus in harmony with the school's view.

### **Constructing identities in the sexless school: teaching style and the school's voice**

The prospectus agrees that there will be less distractions and lessons will be appropriate.

- Students will be 'taught in a style which girls find most encouraging. She will be able to be herself in lessons, without any competition on gender grounds for the confident expression of her ideas and values' (School prospectus, p.5).

Defining this 'style' was problematic. I asked around the staff room but none of the five teachers present could define what this style was. The responses were varied. One teacher said we don't shout (implying girls need more careful handling!). However names of teachers were mentioned to illustrate that we do actually shout. Another teacher suggested that we don't use gendered examples. Another teacher countered this, describing one of his own lessons where the textbook had a gendered example. Teaching style



was then defined as trying to give 'girl-friendly' examples such as shopping for clothes. This was viewed positively despite being a gendered example itself and a potentially derogatory position. A female PE teacher suggested that it might count as a girls' style when the school nurse comes in and teaches them hygiene but of course this happens in a mixed school (although sometimes in single-sex assemblies) and is hardly a teaching 'style.' In fact much of the conversation revolved around content. Given a common national curriculum it is less convincing to argue that particular content constitutes a 'style.' None of the teachers could pinpoint this style. There has been no in-service training or discussion of a teaching style suitable for 'girls' in the time I have been at the school.

Similarly, students also found it difficult to put forward a view of what constituted a 'style' of teaching that would benefit girls and came to the conclusion that there were different styles of teaching. They also note that there is good and bad teaching but this also seems to be unrelated to gender.

JM: In terms of this school then. Not many benefits we came up with other than perhaps less competition in the class, less distractions. Any other benefits of this being single-sex.

Annie: I suppose it's easier. They say sometimes that you know that you have to teach in a certain way and girls respond better to certain things so I suppose you could say that teachers concentrate on that way of learning but I don't think that's particularly true here.

Chelsea: [Agrees]

Annie: It's certainly less true here.

Elizabeth: It's very different. There are very different styles of teaching.

JM: Are there?

Elizabeth: Yes. [definite]

JM: Do you think there's a big variety? In what way?

Elizabeth: Erm there are good teachers and bad teachers, teachers who come across and help you a lot and make you be atoms bonding [Annie laughs] and there are

teachers who just sit there and in a monotone lecture you for a double period and they don't seem to give us anything...[unclear].

*2003 Cohort, January 2002*

Whilst they were aware that being taught in a "girls' style" is a potential benefit of a single-sex school it did not seem to be a central feature of their experience. However the 'style' that is being suggested by the girls seemed to be a shared ethos about achievement and a belief in their abilities to be successful.

These girls argue that the opportunity to discuss more mature matters in lessons without fear of censure from boys was more significant than teaching style.

JM: Do you ever feel like there is a difference in the actual lessons, do you feel like you are taught in a certain way because you are girls.

Natasha: We can talk more about mature things.

[General agreement]

Natasha: Like we can talk more about girl's things. In English.

Prashianthy: Miss Bright does.

Natasha: Yeah and Miss Bright.

JM: What do you talk about then?

Prashianthy: We talk about her hair and stuff.

Natasha: Yeah we talk about.....it's girly stuff isn't it.

Stephanie: In English we talked about girly things today. Romantic novels.

Natasha: It was something about..... Oh yeah.

Stephanie: She told us that it was a sexual fact that .....

Natasha: A guy's hair grows.

Stephanie: If you have sex.

Natasha: If you think about it a lot your hair grows quicker.

Stephanie: It is a fact.



JM: So you wouldn't talk about this if there were boys in the room.

Natasha: Yeah they treat you more maturely.

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

This example shows that talking about sex is an important part of the freedom to construct their own identities. However the interesting point is that although they believe that they can talk about more mature things their examples are extremely gendered ('hair and stuff', 'girly stuff'), factually questionable and perhaps more typically adolescent topics than would be expected of an A-level group. The second part of the prospectus extract argues that girls are given opportunities to 'be herself.' Yet this is complex if we consider the way identities are performed. Is it ever possible to place oneself outside of gender and to perform 'neutrally'? To 'be herself' will still require a position to be held and some conception of gender will influence this position. Being 'herself' for these girls is the freedom to talk about 'girly stuff.' This example suggests a reproduction of traditional gendered interests. The socially constructed habitus does not disappear when a 'girl' enters a single-sex school and the idea that a girl can 'be herself in lessons' suggests a 'doer behind the deed' (Butler, 1990).

The headteacher also makes a similar point:

HT: It's the chance to be people and not necessarily be girls, so they can take a stance. In a mixed school that might be more likely to be a boy's stance. Whether it's mending bikes or whether it's taking physics or whether it's pointing out a view on some sexual related thing in English literature, whatever it is, they don't have to consider whether this is what girls do or they don't have to be put off by the fact that a boy's sitting there who may tease them about the last event they went to. It rules out a whole area of potential self censorship and I think that allows them to be more themselves without losing their femininity, well I don't mean femininity, their femaleness you know that aspect of themselves however they wish it to be, to appear.

March, 2003

The school as a site for gender identities that resist traditional gendered roles is again stressed. Secondly, the pressure to conform to gendered roles through bullying and 'teasing' by boys is removed. Therefore the 'self censorship' that may result from boys' behaviour and operate to inhibit girls is removed. Yet whether this pressure is removed altogether is debatable. The headteachers' hesitation over the issue of retaining a 'femaleness' that is 'however they wish it to be' suggests an uncertainty about identities. It suggests that femininity is essential (necessary and biologically-determined). In this extract femininity is not a social construction but a part of them as 'people.' Yet if it is under threat in mixed gender interactions it must be socially constructed. Another contradiction is that whilst the self appears genderless, notions of femininity influence it. The 'girly stuff' discussed in English is gendered performance that is socially constructed within discourse of acceptable feminine behaviours. There appears to be more acceptable femininities within the single-sex school (they do take Physics, they do like DT and mending bikes) but some femininities are still more powerful than others. The vultures' version of femininity is more traditional in some senses than the girl who does DT, Physics and mends a bike but it gives them high status nonetheless.

**Using feminine identities in school: We just smile and we can do anything**

Amina: We just smile and we can do anything.

Gabrielle: If we hand in our work most of the time we can get away with it.

JM: Do you think you deliberately play on that then?

Amina: What?

JM: Smiling and being nice...

Zoe: I think as a girl you're brought up to do that anyway, you can't help it.

Gabrielle: It doesn't work on the female teachers, though.

Zoe: No, obviously.

JM: So it's more a tactic with male teachers is it?

Zoe: I think so. Definitely.



Gabrielle: God that sounds really mean.

Zoe: It does.

Amina: [laughs]

Gabrielle: I don't know. I think I do it to my female teachers as well. If it's to.....

Zoe: It's just a way to.....I don't think boys are brought up to get things by being nice. Girls are much more manipulative and they're brought up to smile and say yes, thank you.....

Gabrielle: I'm really sorry. [penitent voice] I'll do it for tomorrow.

Zoe: Work up tears if you can.

Amina: My god! Not mentioning any names but some people can make themselves cry. [all laugh]

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

Being feminine in this way is both a conscious choice, a tool to be used to maintain positions of power and garner capital within a particular social field. 'Being nice' is sometimes seen as a position forced upon an individual rendering them powerless or placing them as the object (Holmes, 1995). Girls were aware of the influence they could have by reverting to traditional stereotypes of themselves as 'nice girls.' Zoe recognised the socially constructed, and perhaps inevitable, nature of this identity ('you're brought up to do that anyway, you can't help it'). There is a sense here that the ways of being are limited by discourses which denote a particular set of behaviours, a particular cultural repertoire, that an individual is helpless to avoid. Skeggs has noted the particular class dimension of being respectable which has been seen as a middle class preserve denied to working class women (Skeggs, 1997). However these girls use their identities as 'nice girls' to their own benefit. They are not powerless within this discourse of niceness and respectability.

This tactic of reverting to 'stereotype' did seem to have a particular gender aspect, as students noted it was applied with more success with their male teachers. They may stress this aspect initially to reaffirm the compulsory heterosexuality of their identities. However, the students did acknowledge

that they were 'manipulative' with all teachers and argued that this was more manipulative than boys would be. I observed the unnamed girl cited here crying in an English lesson (with female teacher) when coursework deadlines were looming. Teacher expectation can reinforce typical gender behaviour through accepting such performances as 'authentic' (Griffin, 1985).

Even this powerful feminine tool then, that allows them to 'do anything', has a negative connotation undermining the power and legitimacy of their position. They see their polite, smiling, compliant following of the behavioural expectation as 'really mean' and 'manipulative' generalising this to all girls. Their performances as 'nice girls', coupled with the narrative retelling of their use of their feminine identities, reinforces their femininity and collective identity (Epstein, 1998). It has its uses but ultimately it seems that they view this femininity negatively.

#### **Myth of the sexless school: Sexual identities in the single-sex school**

'In schools...sexuality is both everywhere and nowhere' and this school is no exception (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; p.108). Students were aware of the stereotyped, but contradictory, views of themselves as 'sluts'/'innocent'/'lesbians'/'desperate.' Sexuality in school is simultaneously taboo, assuming sexual innocence, but ever-present in terms of abuse, flirting, classroom behaviour and disruption, playground games and conversations, graffiti, dress codes and social interactions (Thorne, 1993; Mac An Ghail, 1999; Kehily, 2002). Sexuality is embedded within sets of power relations that are present within social relations continuously and this means that 'sexual oppression, violence and discrimination are a continual everyday phenomenon and not confined to extraordinary incidents or specific aspects of the curriculum' (Mac En Ghail, 1999, p.101). The labelling of single-sex school girls is a way of undermining them, possibly linked to fears of women 'getting together.' Girls construct their identities in relation to these everyday phenomenon.

Attending a single-sex school suggested a number of possibilities in terms of an individual's sexuality and their sexual behaviour.



Chelsea: They think we're sluts or lesbians.

Annie: [laughs] Yes.

Elizabeth: It's just so stupid.

Annie: You hear people say girls' schools are either like that or completely prudish.

Chelsea: Or they go they're from \_\_\_\_\_ they must be desperate.

JM: So there's the perception of either lesbians, man crazy ...

Annie: Or completely innocent.

*2003 Cohort, January 2002*

Some researchers have highlighted the ways in which sexuality is used to label girls. Terms such as 'nice' or 'slag' are used to stereotype girls and a similar process is taking place on girls within the single-sex environment by labelling them according to their perceived sexual behaviour (Delamont, 1980). Here the possible identities are very rigid and seem fixed. There is an either/or position for identities such as lesbian or man crazy, prudish or desperate and little sense of fluidity. Societal expectations create these fixed positions to give the illusion of gender as a coherent organising entity (Butler, 1990). The impact of the single sex school on sexual identities is to imply a fixed negative position.

When sexuality is discussed within school, what is really assumed is heterosexuality. The position of heterosexual innocence is the ideal femininity within the school. Where homosexuality is referred to it is by those who are undermining women as an insult or as the other in a binary opposition of heterosexual/ homosexual. Usually homosexuality is just ignored (Rogers, 1994).

*Assembly September 2003*

In a recent assembly, there was that interesting phrase when the headteacher showed a picture of a number of girls from the turn of the century. The picture was a class photograph and as the teacher in the photograph was described one phrase described all the girls as completely 'in love' with her. At this stage there was some

discomfort/mirth at this phrasing and a great deal of shuffling from the audience.

I would not want to suggest that all those who noted this phrase were reacting to the implied homosexuality but it perhaps breaks the unspoken nature of sexuality in schools or signals a rejection of this 'way of being.' This is a very tenuous suggestion of homosexuality but assemblies have never explicitly referred to it. More often the message about 'what women do' is heterosexual in the sense that it is a choice between working and family life (married motherhood) or a balance of these two areas. One form of sexuality is being reinforced within discourses that stress the 'natural' assumption that women will marry or work. These discourses exclude 'unnatural' homosexual identities.

The idea of (hetero)sexuality emerging 'naturally' is discussed by the headteacher here.

HT: I went to a boarding school and once every three or four years we had a night time fire practice when we knew that firemen would come that would help us out of windows and we would stay awake all night combing our hair. I mean what do you call this? Sex deprivation or what? No it's a natural factor of developing sexuality so I think the fact that they dress – they don't all but some of them – are very aware of boys is as it should be and it's so obvious to us when you suddenly produce a boy, there was a twenty one year old in fact a nineteen year old has come to look at lessons to think about teaching and he went into a room and all the girls just freaked out. Now OK if there were boys who were here they wouldn't be like that but if there was one particular new boy who came or one boy became much taller and better looking next term they'd be like that all the time.

JM: So you think it [the single-sex environment] minimizes it?

HT: I think it moves it out of the arena much of the time and in the past when talking to girls about it – I haven't



actually talked to girls about this but I used to because it was of interest a few years ago when some boys' schools were beginning to take girls into sixth form and particularly when Lantern school was going to – because I knew we were going to be affected by that as we have been – and one girl said 'Oh no boys and drugs are fine in their place but we don't want them in school.' And I thought it was interesting that she was a girl with a huge social life, lots of friends who were boys, lots of boyfriends. I am sure that what she meant was that school is for work, school is for our friendships untrammelled by all these other things and its not for all this other stuff that you do outside of school. So it's serious and although she wasn't always a serious sort of girl she took school seriously.

*March, 2003*

Within this discussion the dilemma that emerges seems to be between whether it would be better to have boys present all the time so that they 'wouldn't be like that' or whether 'boys...are fine in their place but we don't want them in school.' Rather than suggesting that the school is 'natural', it is being suggested that the emergent identification with respect to the opposite gender is the 'natural' part of the process. This places the single-sex school in a position as a haven/prison from heterosexual desires. Sexuality is perceived to be a distraction, a threat and is therefore kept outside the confines of the school. It allows girls to adopt 'serious' identities within school. Sexuality is only ushered into this haven by the presence of the boy (or the fireman). When the active subject of the male is removed, sexual desire can be consigned to its secondary position and is moved 'out of the arena.'

The students certainly perceive a benefit of being in a situation where sexuality is less of an issue to be confronted daily and the following extract indicates how the school operates to make students more comfortable in their female relationships.

Gabrielle: Plus you get really good female friendships here so you get very close, I mean I'm always hugging people. Which people say, you know girls' school.

Zoe: There's a lot more of a culture here, especially in the sixth form of all girls together you know. I mean I have no problems about hugging almost anyone in the whole year.

Gabrielle: You feel comfortable.

Zoe: Yeah I think you get a lot less touchy feely when there's mixed ...

Amina: Its nice, that's what I like about this is that it's so open.

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

The use of the word 'culture' is interesting and Delamont argues that a substantial part of any human behaviour is 'culture and hence open to change' (Delamont, 1980; p.9). The culture that has developed within this environment is clearly seen as beneficial to these students and although they are aware of the perception of others outside the school, they challenge this view – 'It's just so stupid'- and have negotiated a culture that can incorporate physical closeness as a positive aspect of friendship. The emphasis on 'close friendships' and 'hugging' and, in other extracts, on the family places their behaviours in a safe discourse that prevents them being labelled lesbian, an 'unacceptable' identity (Epstein et al, 2003).

However the power of this alternative narrative seems less powerful than the disparaging comments that appear to be steeped in consciousness at an early stage. The following example concerned a boy of about seven years of age who passed a group of sixth form students on his way home from school.

JM: So what is the song about our school then?

Jenny: The slappers on the hill. [sings]

Claudia: This little kid was just singing it as he went up the hill.

*2004 Cohort, February 2002*

This extract does echo views made about the invidiousness of prevailing dominant discourses. Researchers have shown how sexualised behaviour can undermine those in more powerful positions and this again emphasizes



the need to view power as shifting and as part of a social process (Walkerdine, 1990).

Debbie: Most people I know that have heard of our school just think we're slags

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

The term 'slag' has been discussed by other researchers (Lees, 1993) and is a particularly effective and flexible label with which to police and limit girls' behaviour.

The pervasive nature of such discourse is interesting in the way that it seems to have permeated the thinking of those who are undermined by it. When these students compare themselves to another single-sex school, it is in a way that increases their status because it is the other school that are much 'worse.' The inference of sexual deviance and the employment of a discourse to undermine their position of power or their status as individuals is exactly the same as that employed by detractors of their own school – 'everyone there is gay.' Through such stories they become complicit in the construction of girls' schools as in some way deviant.

Saskia: [Another school] actually have people who are lesbians!

Jenny: On their muck up day [last day of school] they actually had girls kissing on the lips.

[laughing]

Claudia: *[explaining to me]* They were actually kissing like properly on the lips and they were doing it to wind the teachers up.

Saskia: I've got a friend there who says that everyone there is gay.

JM: Is that true Saskia?

Saskia: Yes because on their muck up day it took them about three hours to get to the green because all their friends kept getting distracted with each other on the way.

[laughter – someone says 'nicely put Saskia']

*2004 Cohort, January 2002*

The close friendships described elsewhere have become deviant here. The power of heterosexuality as the norm is also suggested by her surprise/horror that schools contain lesbians. However Claudia is aware that these girls are performing lesbianism to 'wind the teachers up.' Homosexual performance is used to challenge the dominant heterosexuality. These girls know that their homosexual performance will 'wind the teachers up' and perceive the centrality of heterosexuality as the norm within their single-sex school.

Emily and Alice also perform in a similar way to reduce the power of the lesbian identity placed upon them by Chrissy.

Emily: Chrissy thinks I'm a lesbian so we play up to it. Me and Alice put our arms around each other near her and she goes 'Ugh' but she is the one who first said it yet she doesn't like it if we agree with her by messing around as though we are.

*2005 Cohort, June 2004*

Clearly, homosexuality is distasteful to Chrissy and not a position to be adopted even in 'messing around.'

### Self-censoring identities

#### *Assembly February 2003 – Field notes extract*

Head teacher talked about a phone call she had in a serious way. The caller had said two of her girls – she re-emphasized her girls – had been seen wearing extremely short skirts on the green which had been as high as the top of their tights. The head then talked about the length of skirts and the schools good name but then said there are twisted people out there who would see this as an invitation and she related this to rape cases.

In this explanation, the girl has become the other (the object) who has to modify due to the male sexual drive discourse that, when it is out of control, results in rape (Hollway, 1984). The girls' desire to be in a very short skirt is part of popular culture and their negotiating identities as sexual beings. The speed and concern of the caller and the head's swift response suggest the



dilemma of either having to constrain their freedom or risk the schools reputation and/or potential threats to their safety. The most significant worry for all concerned is that the school is a target for paedophiles and there have been incidents where girls have been targets for attack. The school is in an area where there are a number of other girls' schools.

'A powerful incentive exists for us to police our own behaviour and acquiesce in the idea that men's sexuality is 'naturally' predatory, only to be contained by female circumspection' (Cameron and Frazer quoted in Kehily, 2002, p.88).

The dilemma here is that there is no suggestion that girls' experience is common and should enable political action and transformative action. In a way the message is strongly feminist in the implication that the world is wrong if girls cannot wear their uniform any way they want. Yet at the same time there is an acceptance and passivity with the way that this story is dealt with that draws directly on discourses that see rape and sexual violence as the symbolic expression of male hegemony. This is not a simple issue and the school is made up of girls who at age 11 would not be ready to hear the same message about such issues as those who are 18. It is girls who have to modify their dress under the male gaze (Paechter, 1998) but the alternative is to ignore the physical reality of the risks women face (Francis, 2000).

A form of self-censorship also combats the harassment that is faced below.

Katie: When I went on work experience I asked if there was any work needed doing and they said 'Oh yeah there's lots of work that needs doing' [sexual innuendo style] and they completely interpreted everything differently and you have to think of things differently and reword everything so they won't think of it in any other way except the way you want them to think about it.

JM: You mean like a sexual innuendo in everything?

Katie: Everything I said!

[General agreement that this is what happens]

Niamh: I think some girls are like that. I remember one girl she kept on saying things like 'Wooh.' She was just a

friend I met on holiday, she was just a random person but she did it for everything.

[laughter]

Jenny: I wonder if she had spent a lot of time in the company of men and had learnt to adapt?

Niamh: I had to keep saying 'But I didn't mean it like that.'

*2004 Cohort, January 2003*

It is Katie who modifies her behaviour in the face of sexual innuendo. Jenny picks up on the fact that when Niamh says that some girls also use sexual innuendo it may be because they have spent time with men!

Female teachers also exercise censorship over the issue of clothing. However male teachers are the reason for this censorship.

Svetlana: You see it's....erm....[to others] Do you remember the complaints from male teachers that people were dressing?

Emily: Sexual harassment.

Svetlana: Yeah yeah yeah.

JM: When was that?

Svetlana: It was at the beginning of sixth form. We were being told that the male teachers...were really offended.

Emily: That was half way through sixth form.

Svetlana: The male teachers find it really offensive if we wear sort of low cut jeans and.....

Emily: Yeah we're sexually harassing them and ..

Stella: Yeah I remember that.

JM: That's interesting...when was that said? At a meeting or....?

Stella: We had an assembly about it.

Svetlana: We were asked to stay behind after assembly.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

Girls are under the 'male gaze' so it is suggested by not dressing respectably they harass men. The discomfort of the sexuality issue is apparent. It is everywhere. The presence of male teachers demands that the policing of



low-cut jeans by female teachers has to be even more rigorous. Sexual signifiers are repressed in order to ensure that sexuality is nowhere. But the constant policing suggests sexuality is everywhere.

### **'I'll go crazy': Escaping from the single-sex school**

There is a difference amongst the girls interviewed in this group as some seem to be conforming to the outside view in that the freedom of university will encourage her to go 'crazy' whilst another student is surprised by this and asking whether it will make a difference. The idea of school as a shelter is also returned to by two of the students.

JM: .....We're in a single-sex school which is all fine and has many benefits but eventually you've got to go out into a world which is not single-sex.

Gabrielle: I'm going to go mad.

*[Zoe laughs]*

Gabrielle: I swear I'm going to go crazy.

Zoe: Does it make a difference?

Amina: That's what worries me actually because this is an artificial environment and its not the real world it's so nice.

Zoe: I don't know though.

Gabrielle: We're sheltered.

Amina: We're completely sheltered.

JM: Do you disagree with that? [to Zoe]

Zoe: I think that by this point in our lives, by the later sixth form, there's very very few people who don't have boys as friends.....regularly.

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

The permissive discourse can be identified in the phrase 'I'll go crazy.' The girls disagree about the extent of their sheltered existence and the extent to which they will adopt this permissive position. The school is but one field for the negotiation of identities and Zoe argues that her outside-school experience has reduced the need to 'go mad.'

Yet not all girls share this position and it has been noted that how we see being a girl is often from a white middle class perspective (Ali, 2003).

Amina: But there is the problem, especially if you've been here thirteen years or something, you've just got sisters, you haven't got any brothers you don't really have any close male members of your family, if your families like er Muslim er like mine. This is not me....do you know what I mean? You know people I know in younger years as well, who basically they don't see that much of members of the opposite sex. So they don't see members of the opposite sex on social terms and I think it did affect them.

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

This extract reinforces the point that religious, ethnic and family background does have an impact on how girls understand other people (Khanum, 1992) and the single-sex environment can limit understandings of others although this student found it difficult to be specific on how this 'did affect them.' Gabrielle and Amina experienced the single-sex school as an 'artificial environment....completely sheltered.' Whilst it is 'nice', the stronger this shelter is, the more vulnerable identities are when it is time to leave the shelter. Gabrielle thinks she will 'go crazy' and Amina thinks there is a 'problem' that will have an effect. Through having the space outside school to have 'boys as friends', Zoe has gained a confidence Gabrielle and Amina lack.

### **Masculinity/Femininity: 'Boys are this and girls are that'**

Masculinities and femininities are intertwined. Femininities are often defined in opposition to masculinities. Girls in many extracts have defined their identities in relation to masculinities or alternate femininities that they reject. Femininities/masculinities rely on each other for meaning but cultural differences also influence notions of appropriate femininities and masculinities (Tsolidis, 1996). Within this middle class school the academic, ambitious studious school girl is an appropriate feminine identity whereas this type of identity will be less appropriate in other cultures or amongst other socio-economic classes. Certain femininities/masculinities



are valued above others and occupy a hegemonic position (Connell, 1998). The specific context is key to gaining this hegemony. Masculine influences within the school can be discerned in fantasies and the way they dress and behave. It is 'very easy to see the signifiers of sexuality when observing girls, whether they are interacting with boys directly or not' (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; p.112).

Those girls who experienced a mixed education at primary school often depict masculinities as negative. They position themselves as being freed from this influence within the single-sex school.

*Zoe: [The single-sex school] has made a difference because when I came here I was really, really quiet and it may have just been me but it may have been the fact that I didn't like boys and their pranks and everything. I mean it may just be me getting older and growing up but I am a lot more confident now and I will answer in class and I'm not sure how much that has got to do with ...the school.*

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

Zoe accepts that there is a danger of over-simplifying the influence of the single-sex environment. Zoe, in looking back as a confident, mature student, may over-exaggerate the influence of the school in creating this confidence and this process may have occurred in mixed environments. Zoe's view is tentative and certainly she perceives herself to have been allowed the freedom to become more confident. The dilemma in advocating single-sex school for this obvious benefit is that it could be argued that single-sex environments 'reduce the opportunities pupils' have to test gender stereotypes' (Stanworth, 1981). Zoe retains the negative view of boys as learners – 'pranks and everything' - that she has not had the opportunity to challenge. Her conception of masculinity excludes those versions of masculinity that are pro-education, the quiet studious boy and she reproduces discourses that stress a 'pranks and everything' style of masculinity. This 'macho-lad' masculinity reinforces gender differences and places girls as needing single-sex environments to protect them from the effects of this masculinity and to gain confidence. The school also benefits from this view of masculinity. By presenting boys as different, distracting

and anti-school, it strengthens its own position presenting a united coherent reason for being.

This reproduction of traditional versions of masculinities/femininities is a recurrent theme.

Theresa: I think from boys I know or other schools that teachers are much more aggressive when they teach boys. They might have to say 'Get out of here!' [*Does aggressive teacher voice*]

Rachel: I think it's much more relaxed here because there is a friend I used to go to school with and he is really surprised about how compared to his school it's much more relaxed here.

Svetlana: That's true actually.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Theresa positions boys as needing to be dealt with more aggressively. This again draws on the idea that boys are 'naturally' anti-school, will behave poorly and will need to be excluded from lessons. Their experience is much more relaxed. This may be partly due to the encouragement of passive behaviour expected within traditional femininities discourses or due to teacher coding of similar behaviour as inherently less problematic in girls. It suggests that girls do invest in the 'relaxed' ethos of the school, identifying their femininity as positive against the negative masculine positions adopted by boys.

Whilst, femininities/masculinities research challenges 'natural' differences between girls and boys, the idea of essential differences is strong.

Claudia: I think you get to the age about ten where boys and girls are all just the same and then you start to be different and stay separate.

[general agreement]

Claudia: And then you get to about twelve and thirteen and start to speak to them again.

Katie: And then they have grown up a bit then.



Claudia: I think it is different if you have been to a mixed school. There's things like birthday parties. I was talking to my great aunt the other day and her grandson goes to a mixed school and he's five and he doesn't have any girls coming to his birthday party. And she says that that is always the way that, even though they go to mixed schools, that boys have birthday parties and girls have birthday parties. They like different things.

Niamh: I think that's true like tea parties and things.

Katie: My sister goes to mixed school and all the boys have fallen for her and want to play with her. They say 'Sally come and play at my house' its so sweet.

[A few others make sympathetic noises]

Niamh: I remember fighting over who was going to marry boys – 'I am going to', 'No I am going to.'

Sarah: I remember being four and my friend said he wasn't going to marry me, he was going to marry this other girl and I was devastated.

Niamh: I used to watch Thunderbirds to make this boy like me.

*2004 Cohort, September 2003*

The reinforcement of the traditional separation of interests by the great aunt is conducive to secure gender identities. Certain behaviours are classified as feminine and made to appear 'natural.' An example of such a dominant discourse is the 'gendered habitus' that places marriage as a 'natural' goal for girls (Reay, 2001a). 'Natural' knowledges are socially constructed and, in this case, performed through role-play at a young age. In addition, the sublimation of this girls' own interests in order to gain acceptance – 'watching thunderbirds' – has been engineered to gain the positive male 'gaze' that regulates girls' behaviours (Paechter, 1998). Similarly the sensible/silly dichotomy can also be discerned with the idea that at twelve or thirteen 'they have grown up a bit' (Francis, 1998). These discourses strongly influence identities adopted and the performance of particular femininities.

There are a multiplicity of femininities, many of which oppose the dominant femininities by denying 'essential' or 'natural' womanness and viewing sex and gender as dialectically interrelated (Butler, 1993). The dilemma is that although this offers potential freedom and legitimacy for all identities, it can create an identity crisis for single-sex schools, for feminists and for individuals who have invested in a traditionally gendered sense of the self. The dilemma for the school is that in preserving notions of 'essential/natural' differences between boys and girls, it limits the range of femininities that can be adopted. If a fixed, stable category of 'girl' is to be credible it must also operate in opposition to a fixed version of masculinity.

### **Fantasies within the single-sex school**

Fantasies are a means of exploring potential identities. Walkerdine argues they can empower women to analyse their own position and to make sense of their identities through displacing their situation and linking it to fictionalised and glorified scenarios (Walkerdine, 1997):

'these performing little girls, the Annie stories, the 'Minipops', the girls playing in their gardens and singing in the toilets, are the space for containing a large number of fantasies, projections and introjections which become discursive and material in the social world' (Walkerdine, 1997; p.188).

Part of the focus on make up and clothing seems to rest on the fantasy of meeting someone who will fall in love with you on the basis of your appearance.

Svetlana: Do you remember the toilet assembly?

[All acknowledge]

Svetlana: It was a real mockery of the way people are.

Emily: It was a mockery of the year above us.

Svetlana: It was a mockery of the year 11s. Basically there was a scene where they were in the toilet and using the loo brush as mascara and they exaggerated everything and it's so true you would go into the toilets and people would be doing their make up.

Emily: You do go into the toilets and there are people sorting out their make up.



Svetlana: There was one line and I think it was Serena who was playing one of the characters and they asked 'Why are you putting on make up?' and she said 'Because somebody might see me when my dad picks me up from school.' So they are not even planning to go anywhere it's just in case they are seen.

Emily: I suppose that's it people are hoping they may meet a boy.

Svetlana: It's like the thing that you've only got one chance to make a first impression, always be ready.

Emily: But when you are actually in school. I can understand that at the end of the school day. I mean they all do it anyway they all go to the loos to sort out their make up but I can understand that if they are going to go and meet whoever at Haven Green that's fine, understandable, but to feel the need to make sure it's actually perfect while they're in school and why they feel the need to wear it in school. Actually there is not anyone to impress and no-one particularly cares if you are. No-one actually thinks 'Wow you're wearing make up.'

Svetlana: And do you know what? You are probably in the minority if you don't wear it.

Emily: Yeah – I never wear it.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

The self-mockery of their own feminine behaviour creates a space for those girls who wish to resist being positioned as sexual object. The assembly they describe rejects the version of femininity that rested upon revealing clothes and make-up that are worn to attract men. However, the assembly was so well received because there was a recognition that the exaggeration was steeped in everyday experience. The strength of the fantasy of meeting a boy strongly dictates the behaviour of a number of girls. The emphasis on external appearance needs to be constant in order to make a successful 'first impression.' When Emily denies that wearing make-up gains prestige amongst girls, it suggests the power of the romantic fantasy is even greater. If make-up is not for other girls it means it is being worn (during the school

day) when there is only the very slightest chance of meeting a boy. Emily's point is challenged by the fact that the wearing of make-up seemed to be valued by the vultures and Finnegan's crew. Svetlana also argues that it is only the minority who don't wear it.

Another fantasy revolves around the taboo area of relationships with male teachers.

Jenny: It depends on the teacher's personality itself not on their gender. There is a girl in year 9 who has a real crush on Mr White.

[Others say her name and say 'oh yes' etc.]

[They all talk quite animatedly about how the year nine form were very excited by this girl's crush on the teacher]

*2003 Cohort, June 2003*

Employing male teachers is a dilemma for the headteacher. Part of this dilemma rests upon her fear of the 'destructive' potential of a teacher/pupil liaison. One female teacher informed me that she does not appoint any male who is 'too good looking.' The year 9 girl becomes a keen topic of conversation partly because of the taboo nature of her object of desire. However through their animated discussions, girls construct their sexual identities within heterosexual discourse. The absence of boys creates a space for fantasies such as these that play a role in the construction of sexual identities. Sexuality is apparent in friendships, relationships with teachers, acceptable femininity, teacher recruitment and assemblies and these fantasies seep into many aspects of school life.



**Chapter fourteen – Power, control and resistance**

*'Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' (Foucault, 1979; p.228)*

**'Assemblies are all about power and control'**

Hannah: Assemblies are all about power and control.

JM: What is it about assemblies that you think is about power and control?

Theresa: The fact that we're made to sit through Ms Frame's nonsense and rubbish assemblies. They just don't make any sense. We wouldn't be allowed to do one on what we wanted to.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Control is central to the workings of school life. 'From a Foucaultian perspective the daily organisational routines of school – assembly, the timetable, bells, rules governing spaces such as corridors and playground – can be seen as mechanisms for the control of pupils' (Kehily, 2002; p.24). During the study much data was collected through attendance at the school's daily morning assembly. The students are seated on the floor with the exception of the sixth form who are on raised seating at the end of the hall. Teachers are seated on chairs flanking the body of students. As students file into the hall in silence their uniform is being appraised and regulated particularly by the deputy head and senior teacher (Mrs Aston and Mrs Smith). Offenders are censured. The girls' voices here are a counter-discourse, a discourse against power (Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Hannah: I also don't like the fact that's it's very hierarchy based and we all have to sit on the floor and the teachers get to sit on the side and they are watching and monitoring everything and again it's about power and they get to sit...

JM: Is this something you thought about in lower years or is it something you've thought about since?

Theresa: Yeah.

Svetlana: I think it's something we've thought about since we've been sitting on the raised seating.

Hannah: I don't know.....if you had to sit at the end of the row all the teachers would be able to stare at you and I always hated that.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

The students feel the 'gaze' and this gaze is strongly resented – 'I always hated that.' This 'gaze' seems to have become more apparent 'since we've been sitting on the raised seating.' Their status in the hierarchical year group structure means they are outside the most stringent part of the gaze.

Theresa: Assemblies are just so boring.

[Hannah initiates talk about a good assembly that they all did on the subject of toilets when they were in year 11. I agree it was excellent]

JM: Would you do an assembly if you could then?

Theresa: If it wasn't just me, if it was a group then yeah.

Hannah: You can't do them though. They are really restrictive about what you can do. I can't remember the exact title but we went to them and asked could we do something and they just said no.

JM: What was it?

Hannah: I can't remember something about a movie or something....but they wouldn't allow it. I think its just a waste of space really.

Theresa: It's a punishment. If you get caught talking in assembly it's like 'Right then. You are talking.' [using teacher voice] 'You do an assembly on why you shouldn't' you know.

Jo: Yeah.

Theresa: So it's just a punishment and it becomes routine.

Like ...well Miss \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't really do assemblies any more but like every Wednesday it would be Miss \_\_\_\_\_ with her Chicken soup book or every ....[unclear]

JM: As sixth formers do you have to go?

Hannah: Yeah because we sit in the common room and they tell us to go if you come late.



Svetlana: You are cattle prodded down in to it.

Hannah: Yeah but quite often I just go outside of school because I just don't want to go to assembly.

Svetlana: I think it's terrible.....I think it's really bad that you don't have lessons for period one and two and you can't come in later. Why can't you sleep in? It really gets me.....

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Control is also exercised through the imposition of a sense of community. Not all members of the community can access the control of the assembly – ‘they wouldn't allow it.’ However it is offered to those who don't want to do it. This offer is a cunning social interaction. It is only offered because it will not be taken and it is not offered to those who would take it. It becomes ‘just a punishment’ because you would be even further under the gaze of not only teachers but also other girls. The power of the assembly is in its ability to make them even more visible, talkers are asked to stand up. There is something of the public torture in this routine and is reminiscent of Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon:

‘Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere’  
(Foucault, 1979; p.195).

The Panopticon effect replaces the crowd with separated individualities. To be individual within the assembly environment is to be different and outside the norm and this is what makes Theresa qualify the circumstance in which she would do an assembly - ‘If it wasn't just me, if it was a group.’

### **Resisting power and control in assemblies**

However there is resistance. Hannah resists by absenting herself from assemblies despite teachers attempts at ‘cattle-prodding’ girls into this space.

JM: How is assembly sold to you at the start of the year?

Hannah: [Teacher voice] It's a time of reflection, a chance to gather your thoughts and get ready for the day ahead.

Svetlana: We don't do that though.

JM: What do you do there then?

Svetlana: I don't know but it's not a time of reflection. Because you're not allowed to talk, you're not allowed to do anything you just sort of feel uncomfortable, confined in your space, waiting for Mrs Smith to pounce and tell you to stop talking.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Again the echoes of the Panopticon are present. You are 'confined in your space.' Girls are aware of the orthodox school view of assembly, a 'time of reflection.' However their resistance of this is clearly apparent.

The 'reflection' can also be viewed as a daily silencing of girls yet by 'talking behind hands' (Svetlana) they resist this silencing. Some of the talking is undermining the hierarchical power structures (and the agents of these structure) that are being imposed upon them.

Hannah: Me and Colette just sit there and comment on what the teachers are wearing when they walk in.

Theresa: Yeah like Miss Kane.

Hannah: [laughs] Oh my God did you see Miss Kane's stripy socks today? God what a disaster. I hate her. She thinks she's so hot wearing stilettos.

Theresa: You can tell a lot about teachers how they walk into assembly. Mr Collins just strolls in.

Svetlana: Oh Mr White has the funniest walk. Mr Collins imitates it so well.

Hannah: I think Mr White had problems when he was at school because he had to grow his beard so that he could look older and get some authority and stuff.

Theresa: Yeah.

Hannah: And his walk is all hunched. Like 'please don't look at me sort of thing.'

Theresa: Mr Scully never goes.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

The reflection time is used to ridicule and undermine to various degrees. Even the act of talking is resisting. There is also an implicit collusion with



Mr. Collins who is seen in a positive light due to his nonchalance and his subversive mimicking of another teacher. The students' 'gaze' is being used to judge a teacher through her own uniform – 'stripy socks...stilettoes.' Miss Kane is denied the freedom to wear a 'uniform' that is outside the teacher norm. This uniform denotes a sexual identity – 'she thinks she's so hot' – that is unacceptable to Hannah. This resistance is decidedly non-radical and perhaps as restrictive as the control over their own sexuality. Similarly the idea that 'authority' is dependent upon age is also a conservative view that is perpetuated here.

### Imposing religious and political views

Hannah: They are religiously.....

Theresa: Biased.

JM: Why?

Hannah: We're made to sing hymns like we're all Christians.

Svetlana: The hymns are all Catholic aren't they?

Theresa: I don't care about it but a lot of people do.

JM: Care about what?

Hannah: Well I'm an atheist and I have to sing Christian songs and I don't care but...

Svetlana: But if somebody's strictly of another religion then they might take that offensively.

Theresa: Yeah.

Jo: But they don't have to sing it.

Theresa: You do have to sing it.

Hannah: Otherwise you get told off for not singing.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Despite the cultural diversity of the school, in many ways assembly could be seen as 'the imposition of a hegemonic version of white Englishness' through our predominantly Christian worship and this echoes other studies on issues of power and control in school assemblies (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; p.110). The usual format of assembly incorporates a hymn that is of Christian/Anglican nature. 'Jerusalem' or 'Morning has broken' would be

typical examples although there have been some attempts to introduce more modern hymns at the insistence of the student school council.

Similarly some students sense that there is an attempt to indoctrinate and reproduce political views.

Emily: Sometimes it feels like it's a platform for Mrs West to try and indoctrinate us. I ignore it but I get angry with it and I lose respect for her every time she does it.

JM: Really?

Emily: Because she says [puts on liberal teacher voice] 'Everybody is allowed all these different views and yes everyone should have different views and it's a brilliant thing that we can do this' and yet she tries to put all her views on us. Like she did it with the monarchy. The monarchy is her favourite one.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

The orthodox view is offered by Mrs West but where this is transparently a view, what is taught is not what is learnt. Students resist the imposition of the *doxa* (Bourdieu, 2000). The singing of the hymn is also not without subversion.

JM: Didn't you tell me Zara always used to sing out of tune?

Hannah: So did Lisa and Polly.

Theresa: What did they do? Sing a different song?

Hannah: They would just sing really loud and out of tune.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

Zara, Lisa and Polly were part of the 'Finnegan's crew' and they resist the schools values by performing (in a real sense) an alternate 'way of being.'



**Power through uniform**

Prashianthy: I don't think this school is that strict.

Stephanie: No but it's more petty.

Prashianthy: Yeah.

Stephanie: It's like stupid little things like the colour of your socks when you are wearing trousers or wearing a skirt whether your hair band matches your uniform.

Prashianthy: I don't think our school's that bad.

Stephanie: No, but they're stupid.

Natasha: They're stupid rules.

Stephanie: Why should we have to try and present ourselves when boys don't have to? That is so bad.

JM: Has it ever been explained why you have to wear white socks or whatever?

[They have a brief discussion about why – it is a bit unclear – but there is no consensus]

Natasha: I think it's because when we walk out of school people will think we look respectable.

Stephanie: So we look neat.

Natasha: Yeah, which is bad. So that we all look the same.

*2003 Cohort, November 2001*

Although Prashianthy does not feel the school is so bad, the attempt to regulate uniform can be related to issues of sexuality as well as power and control (Epstein & Johnson, 1999; Kehily, 2002). The 'petty' nature over uniform is questioned, as is the need for conformity and respectability. The power of the external gaze is at play here and is part of the need to 'present ourselves.'

Uniform can be seen as a constant struggle over identities. It signifies emergent sexuality and confers positions of status and power within peer groups. The shifting nature of identities can be seen in the way that whilst teacher approval within lessons is a form of power and capital is gained through success in terms of the habitus specific pedagogy that rests on the teachers' view of appropriate behaviour, this does not necessarily mean status and powerful positions within peer

groups. Uniform appears to be a mechanism through which peer approval can be maintained in tandem with conformity to teacher approved behaviour. The subversion of uniform is not always overtly sexual. It allows some individuals to escape the stigma of 'conforming' or 'being a boff' because, as one student (Pia) noted 'it gives you something to moan about if a teacher tells you off but you know it isn't that serious.' The range of subversion is vast. Pullover sleeves are modified with holes to enable sleeves to be pulled over the thumb, shirts are not tucked in, socks left rolled down or not worn at all, shoe heels are above regulation height, inappropriate jewellery is worn, make up is slightly too obvious, with PE kits or amongst the sixth form (who have no formal uniform) midriffs are displayed.

Svetlana is actually a 'good' student who was given an academic scholarship yet she is not immune to the power of this need to subvert uniform and break the no make up rule.

Svetlana: I have never really worn that much make up.

Rachel: There was that time when you came in with that mascara on in year 11.

[Both laugh]

Svetlana: Oh my God! I thought you'd forgotten that.

Rachel: [to me] We were all saying to her have you got make up on and she was saying 'No' but it was blue.

Svetlana: I didn't wear it again.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

The type of resistance here is a performance but one which is undermined by Svetlana's peers rather than by the school. She can laugh about this now but her attempt to hold a powerful anti-school rule position failed. The fact that Rachel remembers this incident attests to the strength of this failure.

Uniform subversion can result in a powerful and powerless position that is simultaneously held. This means that to teaching staff or the school governors there is a view of subverted uniform that diminishes students status and the peer-group view that values students on their ability to subvert this uniform.



JM: People still tell you off for what you're wearing then.

[All agree]

Svetlana: I was wearing...coz I never wear revealing clothes or anything but I was wearing stilettos erm stiletto boots or whatever. It was the one day of the year that I wore them and Miss Aston immediately saw them and said [Louder voice] 'I've seen you around the school, you've been wearing really bad like indecent clothes. This has got to stop.'

Hannah: Yeah. Oh my God. I was wearing once right really nice grey pin stripe jeans like with a crease down the front even! With a shirt and a black v-neck thing with shoes going for my smart look and I literally had this much midriff on each hip [indicates about a centimetre] and she shouted at me and said it was offending her eyeballs.

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

'Acceptable' subversion ('I never wear revealing clothes'/ 'this much midriff') avoids the negative sexual signification that can be used to regulate and undermine other girls' behaviour (and thus strengthen the validity of your own identity). Hannah continued the discussion:

Hannah: Well I'm sorry if I'm offending your eyeballs look at Leanne Coates.

Theresa: Yeah it's true.

Hannah: You know Kerry got shouted at for her short skirt today by Mrs Short and Mr Poll.

Theresa: I don't like Mrs Short.

Hannah: And she was like 'look at Leanne' and they go 'What?' and she says 'She's a Ho and she shags anything that moves.'

[A bit of shock from the other three girls]

Theresa: But that's rude though.

[Hannah laughs and repeats it – possibly for effect given the strong reaction from other three girls]

*2005 Cohort, May 2004*

The way girls resist clothing regulation is clearly very important. The link between Leanne's clothes and her description, as a 'Ho' who is sexually promiscuous, is made explicit. Although the link between Leanne's revealing clothes and promiscuity is made, this link does not apply to Kerry who can wear short skirts presumably because she is not a 'Ho.' The use of the term 'Ho' diminishes Leanne's status in the same way that the terms such as slag have been applied (Lees, 1993). In Hannah's story, Kerry appears affronted because her identity is linked to an overt sexuality that she rejects. However her use of the term 'Ho' and her attack on the behaviour of another girl is very strong and Theresa challenges this as 'rude.' From these girls' point of view, Leanne has 'got it wrong' by being overtly sexual in her choice of dress in school and by being perceived to be too sexually active outside school. This wrongness challenges their own ways of being so it is termed deviant and Leanne is positioned as 'other' and is hence less powerful. But the shock at Kerry's vehemence suggests reservations about 'othering' her in this way.

## Conclusion

Schools are influenced by wider societal values. Through internal power and control mechanisms such as assemblies, uniform and ethos, they can reproduce these values. Bourdieu argues that they reproduce existing orthodoxies (Bourdieu, 1977). However, these orthodoxies are not fixed and, through resistance, agents within schools can challenge accepted knowledges. Students are not merely structured by the powerful structures of the school – it is a dialectical process.

An incident about shoes underlined how minor changes are achieved. The school has constantly attempted to regulate the size of heels. Mrs. Aston gave the standard lecture that heels should be less width than the tip and first joint of the thumb. However in the staff room a number of senior members of staff discussed the point that it is difficult to buy new shoes with the correct height of heels. This undermining of the position of the school was beginning to challenge the dominant way of thinking and places the deputy head in a more powerless position. Shifts in wider societal values were cited to justify this new more permissive position. This is not a



fundamental shift in the values of the school but illustrates how orthodoxies have to adapt if they are to remain orthodoxies. The uniform remains in place to regulate girls' images but it has had to move in line with more permissive societal values.

Subtle shifts can be discerned in girls' challenges to power and control mechanisms. They subtly resist in assemblies. They recognise hegemonic power structures and the school is increasing the range of hymns being sung. But they also internalise some values about acceptable identities for girls and form part of the regulatory 'gaze' that operates on teachers and other students. There is a capital that can be gained by colluding. Wearing uniform that does not challenge 'acceptable' orthodoxies too radically is clearly important. Girls also have an investment in conforming and to the school working. Rejecting everything outright is daunting and less preferable to 'putting up with things' (Annie). 'Serve your time, keep your head down and one day you can sit on the raised seating in assemblies' (Prashianthy) is a view that many would support.

### **Chapter fifteen – Conclusion: ‘Bunnies with Steel tails?’**

In concluding the data analysis I return to two central dilemmas. Firstly, what does it mean to be a feminist and what possible identities are suggested for girls within the single-sex school? Secondly, what messages surround the issue of families, marriage, careers and children? Historically, schools have contributed to the reproduction of traditionally gendered roles stressing nurturing, supportive, subordinate positions (Weiner, 1994). What possible identities are envisaged for, and by, the girls within the single-sex school with respect to marriage careers and children?

This is clearly an area where in-school and out-of-school experience collide. Powerful, successful women exist within the school. Yet the school is part of a wider culture and girls’ habitus will also be formed by earlier experiences. This is supported by Arnot:

‘it is here, in the early educational experiences of family life, that the child’s habitus is formed. This “habit forming force” becomes the foundation of perception and appreciation in all subsequent experiences - education action may transform early training but, according to Bourdieu, it can never totally reverse its effects’ (Arnot, 2002; p.43).

Fathers have been noticeably absent in discussions about caring or nurturing roles thus far and in this chapter the implication is that fathers were busier in the public world whilst mothers generally adopted domestic roles.

#### **Being a feminist**

Annie: Yeah. But I do get the feeling that in girls’ schools you do sometimes get the feeling that you are better. Like Mrs Aston [mimics strident teacher voice] ‘You will be on power sharing executives of the world!’ [laughter]  
Elizabeth: She says [mimics again] ‘You are bunnies with steel tails!’ [Annie laughs]  
Chelsea: What did she say? [surprised]  
Elizabeth: [mimics] ‘You are bunnies with steel tails.’ [laugh]



Chelsea: She really scares me.

*2003 Cohort, January 2002*

This extract suggests that feminist ideologies are being introduced into the single-sex school. Girls should expect to be 'on power sharing executives.' The impact on identities is less certain. The idea of being powerful itself may be frightening because it is a non-traditional position for girls within the workplace. This message is communicated through traditionally effeminate imagery i.e. 'bunnies with steel tails.' Being 'bunnies with steel tails' offers a solution to tensions for women in modern Western societies. The traditional femininities implicit in the notion of being 'bunnies' is attached to an ability to transcend this femininity, to be aggressive and compete, to have 'steel tails' when this is required.

The comment 'She really scares me' is ambiguous. If girls are scared by the feminist message itself, it could be argued that although the school presents this view through some of the views of its staff, the impact of this message is still too powerful for the students to be influenced positively by it. If it is the rhetoric and personalities through which this message is communicated that 'scares,' it is less the concept of using feminine skills allied to strength, and more the identity this will dictate that 'scares' them. The school (or at least some its agents) are operating to introduce feminist ideology into students' master narratives but the success of this introduction seems limited. Whilst the idea is received positively, the logical product of the idea, the strong feminist teacher is a scary prospect. This suggests that their positive view of the idea is either superficial or that it has not been intellectualised at a level which enables the student to project their own notion of 'bunnies with steel tails' onto their own reality. However, it has been internalised it at a level that has rendered it memorable enough to discuss in this interview.

### The dilemma of feminist identities

Whilst being successful is an explicit aim in interviews, the backlash against liberal feminism generally (Faludi, 1992) and adopting overtly feminist identities was often apparent. The girls rejected the validity of some role models/successful women.

Jenny: It's like when we were doing women MPs though. Just because you have women MPs doesn't necessarily mean that women are any better at their jobs or can do more to help other women.

Niamh: Oh I hate that – it's like we need to bump up figures so anyone will do.

*2004 Cohort, June 2003*

Girls found it difficult to identify with feminists who were 'lesbians', 'militants' or 'mental' (same group as above) echoing research that positions feminism as boring, anti-pleasurable and serious (Skeggs, 1997). Feminism was Mrs Aston's 'weakness' and, remarkably, no student named any other female teacher as a potential feminist. The notion of being a feminist is clearly problematic for these middle class girls and the strength of the backlash appears very strong (Frazer, 1993). The social construction of feminists as deviant has perhaps become an orthodox knowledge. Challenging this orthodoxy is difficult. It requires a dislodging of habitus developed through a history of expectations about 'acceptable' feminine behaviour.

The rejection of Mrs Aston's feminist position is also repeated by Svetlana and Emily.

Svetlana: To be quite honest I don't think that she [*Mrs Aston*] gives us the correct role model.

JM: Why's that?

Svetlana: By promoting her feminist views about you know...the fact is that it stays in my mind when she has told us about her husband and the babies [*Svetlana had told me earlier that Mrs Aston had described babies as parasites*]. It stays in your mind but not in a positive way. It's not the thing that you would want to be like. You think



'Oh my God I'll do everything I can not to be like that. I don't want to have these views in the future so I'll do everything I can to be the exact opposite.'

Emily: For me it hasn't really bothered me but if she's trying to make it to show us how good women are, show us sort of the feminist viewpoint then it hasn't really worked as far as I'm concerned but I always take what they say with a pinch of salt anyway.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

Svetlana does not see Mrs Aston's position (feminist, heterosexual, no children) as a 'correct' position. She cannot dislodge the notion of 'correct' ways of being when encountering an alternate way of being. The strength of the feminist message seems too threatening and the imagery is undeniably powerful. There is a distancing effect whereby Mrs Aston's desire to impart core values of her habitus results in the marginalisation of the message. Svetlana reverts to an 'exact opposite' orthodox position. Similarly, Emily's resistance to all school messages is notable ('I always take what they say with a pinch of salt anyway') but the single-sex school is still impacting on the construction of gendered identities. The impact on both Svetlana and Emily is to make their version of feminism more conservative, traditional and less openly challenging. However, the alternative way of being that Mrs Aston presents is powerful and Svetlana acknowledges it 'stays in my mind.' Although the strength of more traditional femininities, may lead them to reject the extreme notion of babies as parasites it does offer a way of being heterosexual women that does not 'naturally' imply motherhood.

Ensuring positive pro-feminist messages is an aim of the school but one dilemma for the head and deputy head is the gender balance of the staff. The dilemma emerges from a tension between providing a clear message that women can fulfil demanding roles through daily physical evidence of this in the form of teaching staff and employing people who are 'good enough.' The importance of girls having female teachers to weaken gendered perceptions of subjects has been noted (Warrington & Younger, 2000; p.498). The fear is that men will be seen as 'better' across a range of roles and subjects.

JM: What do you think their argument is when they want you to be taught by women?

Svetlana: I don't think that men are always naturally good as teachers.....in that role..... I mean men are generally physical work....I don't know.

[Stella laughs]

Emily: That's just as oppressive as people's views on women being in the house it's ...

Svetlana: That's true actually. I mean I don't agree with it but I think that's what their view is of it.

Stella: I think she wants role models for us.

Emily: For me though at this school most of the teachers who have ever helped me out have been men anyway.

Svetlana: Mmmm that's true.

*2005 Cohort, April 2004*

The impact of being taught by women has several possible effects. Stella identifies a potential effect as 'role models for us' but appears doubtful. Svetlana seems to be suggesting that women are more 'natural' teachers than men and furthermore that the school thinks this ('that's what their view is of it'). Whilst Emily rejects this as oppressive, Svetlana reinforces traditional dualities of nurturing positions for women and men in a 'physical'/active role. Yet even this nurturing role is undermined when Emily argues that 'most of the teachers who have ever helped me out have been men.' This is the Head's dilemma. Employing men shows their flexibility and ability in transcending traditional roles. It also brings uncertainty about what the school is and what it should be doing. The effect of men on girl's education, the consideration of effects of girls seeing women in power, a suspicion about why it is that men are applying and potential difficulties of pastoral relationships all contribute to the dilemma.

HT: Is this school attracting male applicants more than other schools. Either there are more men teachers or there is a bias here, something about us is attracting more men to apply but you wouldn't have thought that in a girls school would you?



JM: Not really. Maybe people apply because it is a good school?

HT: Or a job, or in the right place. I don't know – I am quite intrigued by it but sometimes we have seen disappointment with girls getting male form tutors. I don't think it is that particular male, I think it is some girls like a mother well most of them don't mind and make the most and really make an awful lot from having a man as a form tutor, more than they would do a woman, so I don't think overall it's good or bad, I just think it is different.

*March 2003*

It is seen as significant that some girls don't like the idea of a male being the form tutor and this is linked to a gendered view of women as nurturers – 'girls like a mother.' The implication is that men cannot fulfil this role. Although men can offer an 'awful lot' it is seen as different. The extreme way of viewing this is that the school is not effecting permanent change but merely confirming entrenched ideas about the roles of men and women and about accepted femininities and masculinities (Stanley, 1990). The reality for girls such as Emily is that male teachers have adopted a nurturing role rather than women and this challenges traditional notions of male/female gender roles.

### **Marriage and children**

Zoe: I think that marriage and children are things that you expect from ...your birth really and the career is something that has to be impressed upon you later when you learn things so that you get a good balance between the two. Or whatever the balance that you think you'd want, you're given the instruments and then it's up to you.

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

Zoe's suggestion is that there is an inherent biological notion of 'marriage and children' reinforced in the early stages of childhood. Although marriage is just as socially constructed as a career, Zoe places it as natural 'from your birth.' She sees career as being 'impressed upon you later when you learn things' therefore a key aspect of the school experience. The dilemma of

marriage and/or children versus career was apparent in a number of interviews.

Some research has argued that for middle-class girls nothing is allowed to get in the way of their potential, usually a successful professional career (Lucey, 2001). Lucey's research suggested girls became anorexic or self-harming in the face of this pressure but I did not find the same level of pressure. The girls do see university/career as the clearest path but there is a sense of the school addressing the dilemma flexibly offering a number of acceptable positions.

JM: Do you envisage a future of marriage, career and children? All those things.

Gabrielle: No I don't want a career. I want to be a mummy.

[The others say 'aw']

Gabrielle: I want to be a wife and mother.

JM: That's quite unusual at this school isn't it?

Zoe: Very. I think everybody wants to work. Always at the back of your head you think you know marriage and children it's going to happen but it might not. I'm more fussed about my career.

Amina: Yeah my career is first.

JM: Is there anything in the school organisation here that you think that message comes across that you should be one or other or both.

Amina: No. Mrs West on Thursday gave us a talk about erm how you can manage and how you have to be flexible and how you have to be able to put say your career on hold for your children for a little bit and then.....

[Zoe missed it]

Amina: [explains to Zoe] Yes she was telling us about it, how she managed it and so no er and I think they try and emphasize it and she said 'That I know that we haven't talked about this and that is one of the reasons I want to talk about it.'



Zoe: But then you've got Mrs Aston who's like forceful feminist.

Amina: Yeah she was saying that out of a survey of 2000 girls in year ten they were asked do you want to get married and 90% of them said yes.

*2002 Cohort, December 2001*

Whilst the headteacher seems to be proposing a view of motherhood and career that puts motherhood in the definite ascendancy, girls privilege career over family. Gabrielle is unusual in her desire to be a 'mummy' (she corrects herself to 'wife and mother' in her next comment, a more 'acceptable' position). This is a view that some researchers have argued is a function of positive examples, be they real people or within literature, that are more likely to be present in single-sex environments (Auchmuty, 1999; Deem, 1980). This issue reflects many of the recurrent themes. The school does not stray outside the norm of heterosexual family life and relationships. It illustrates the Head's dilemma in that the school has to reflect the values of its clients who have had children at some stage in their lives. It also illustrates how individual habitus impacts upon discourses within the school. The Head has put her own career on hold and presents a way of resolving the career/family dilemma that was recognisable to many of the girls. This is not the only way and girls internalise other views such as Mrs Aston's 'forceful feminist' position. The working woman discourse is powerful here and, through its insistence on professional work, is a way the school reproduces class hegemony (Kenway, 1990). A note of caution is that this may not challenge male gender hegemony as just as women get to professions they are losing status (Walkerdine et al, 2001).

### **The family**

The students were very resistant to the notion of inequality in the family. Clearly the view that families are a 'good thing' was a powerful view to challenge. This suggests that unequal relationships within the family home have been internalised and have become accepted as 'natural', 'everyday common sense' understandings. This suggests the frameworks, which seek to uncover these myths and practices and work towards a transformative practice, have much to do in challenging powerful discourses.

***Sept 2002 (field notes extract)***

In discussion with my year 11 Religious issues group (those students who do not take GCSE religious studies attend this non-examined discussion course for one forty minute period per week) we talked about Cicero's quote 'If men and women are to live equal lives the family should be abolished' (this is a discussion point on a worksheet). The class thought this was rubbish and initially claimed that their families were against type if anything with the female having more power. They denied the existence of gender inequality in any form. Only one girl out of 20 agreed with Cicero.

However during discussion the girls themselves raised the following points:-

- there was a difference between their experience and male siblings with the latter being given much more freedom in terms of playing further from home, less monitoring when going out, being able to stay out later.

- whilst their fathers did share domestic duties often they did the higher status meals with mothers doing the meals at times like breakfast or lunch or quick teas.

- The father had the 'main' job.

- Their families were likely to be at the more equality end of the scale due to their own social class and due to the fact that their mothers were likely to come from families which had encouraged them to be successful.

The issue of Christmas presents which was initiated by me also surprised them (they all recalled presents such as dolls, Wendy houses, nurses sets) and they quickly latched on to patterns in the socialisation of themselves as girls and to notions of expected behaviour which was often constructed according to gender type. I am not sure we got past recognition but I was surprised by how gendered their experiences were and also by their unwillingness to



initially challenge the idea that social structures were gendered.

For many girls the idea that the family is not a place of equality, and is therefore not an ideal to aspire to, fundamentally challenges habitus socially constructed from an early age. To strip away the family as a social organisation and to criticise this structure is actually threatening in terms of their own identities so it is not surprising that their initial reaction was one of resistance. A similar embedded belief is in the 'natural' difference between men and women that can be seen in their work. Countless students have told me how their work can be distinguished from boys by the way that they make it 'pretty' and 'put flowers on it.' The strength of this belief is perhaps due to early experience of gendered feminine roles. Differences are presented as 'just the way things are.' The pattern of socialisation through toys was also traditional and it has been argued that toys 'continue to transmit a damaging, gendered and unequal world' (Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen, 2002; p.106).

Whilst, the question of why girls should play quietly or make work pretty, and what this means about the way women are positioned in terms of their gender identity, is not openly challenged, there was a sense that through humorous stories about making work 'pretty' they were actually undermining its power. By adopting these gendered understandings into their stories about themselves they seem to be choosing how to retell them, thus creating their own identities. As an agent of the single-sex school, my role here was to promote some discussion of gendered 'knowledges' but it is the girls who actively reject, accept or ignore these knowledges depending on the strength of prior understandings imparted within the family or other out-of school socialisation. This suggests the potential but also the limits of the single-sex schools' impact on the construction of gender identities.

### **How I became me: Concluding points**

Traditional discourses are still present within the single-sex school.

However, ideas such as the 'natural' mothering, caring role are challenged by the competing claims of career. The single-sex school does promote an alternate way of being for girls. However there is a delicate balance required

in proposing what girls should be. It cannot be done so strongly that the school loses support. For instance, the role of the female nurturer cannot be completely denied as this may alienate potential clients. Such dilemmas illustrate the complex interplay between school, girls, parents, capitalist society, history, tradition and feminist ideology.

Girls are grappling with complex ways of being and contradictory discourses. The idea of being 'bunnies with steel tails' provides one solution to the dilemmas of feminism, of being competitive, successful women whilst retaining feminine qualities. What is possible for these middle-class girls is the emphasis on the 'steel tails.' The single-sex school has stressed their potential, the 'we can do anything' message, and has provided the cultural capital that will equip them with this steel. Their femininity can be preserved by being 'bunnies' (still stressing heterosexual identities) but bunnies that can compete for positions of power and influence.

Successful careers can be seen as a prescriptive path these middle class girls must follow (Walkerdine, 2001). Their parents have invested a great deal in their education for them to resist it. But the school has attempted to offer alternate versions of femininity, not least through the Head's explicit references to her own experiences and to the dilemmas they will live. Even where girls reject feminist messages they debate them and these debates may be a way of exploring and negotiating potential identities. Although the feminist message is not necessarily consistent, the seeds sown here may have immense benefit in their futures.



## **Section five - Final conclusion**

**How does the single-sex school impact upon the construction of gendered identities?**

The girls' voices suggest that the single-sex school has a powerful influence on their identities and their gendered sense of self. However I have been keen to stress that this influence varies. Some girls construct their femininities in traditional ways, focusing on appearance for example, whilst others see the single-sex school as freeing them from such concerns. I have also stressed my own position in the research and argue that the girls' voices suggest sophisticated performances through which their gender identities are constructed and maintained. I see my analysis of the girls' voices as contributing to a wider debate concerned with making girls' experiences visible. Though 'conclusions' suggest a finality that I do not wish to imply, these concluding comments aim to draw out the main elements of my findings, to outline potential areas for further study and to summarize the contribution of my research to debates on gender identities.

Adopting a Bourdieuan framework was useful in facilitating an analysis of individuals within the structure of the school. The culture of the school rewards certain behaviours and values and, on the whole, these are habitus friendly. Girls have a sense of the 'rules of the game' and teachers and parents support their performances within this game. This 'feel for the game' is not always conscious but even when performing anti-school positions on issues such as dress, girls hold dual positions recognising the capital to be gained through conformity within lessons. The school operates within larger structures and girls clearly engage with debates that support them as women. The fact that all groups, including the vultures or the Finnegan's crew, privilege examination success and achievement reflects this.

A significant finding for me concerned feminist identities. The fragmentation of the feminist movement and the subsequent uncertainty over future directions for feminism is reflected in the school's confused feminist message. The backlash against feminism could be clearly discerned

within girls' stories. Yet even where they are sceptical about the adoption of 'feminist' identities and show awareness of the 'risks' of a feminist identity, the single-sex school enabled them to construct alternate identities that are active, powerful and aspirational stressing achievement and the need to have 'steel' tails. Identities are never complete and the way girls address dilemmas, such as those concerning marriage/career, reflects this fluidity. They are works in progress and identities constructed within this single-sex school appear to allow space and freedom to be academic, high-achieving girls without adopting the narrow feminine voices noted in some mixed school research (Rogers et al, 1994).

Of course, this study cannot make a comparison to other schools but the girls' message that *academic* competition within the school is free from gendered pressure is very strong. The girls value this freedom highly and they stress its importance upon their sense of self. They adopt positions that garner academic capital in terms of qualifications but also in terms of their belief in their own abilities to succeed: 'We can do anything' is a strong message. It is difficult to argue that this could happen as easily in a mixed school and the girls believe that academically their school serves their interests as young women. As a result their investment and collusion with the aims and values of the school is marked. Even the most anti-school subcultures have a commitment to work and a desire for success that can be partly attributed to their identities as girls attending a single-sex school. The vultures or the Finnegan's crew also achieve academically. They are not victims of a version of femininity they are forced to conform too. They hold dual positions, differentiating between in-school and out-school behaviour, in a manner that suggests the school enables the construction of a flexible, powerful range of femininities.

However, their performances do reflect some concerns. Compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced strongly and their own performances suggest an internalisation of the idea that alternative identities such as lesbian are negative. This is also strongly supported by the schools messages about families, marriage and careers. However, the school does not operate outside wider discourses, which depict homosexuality as deviant for



instance. Dilemmas for the schools agents, such as the Head, perhaps reflect the compromises that have to be made in the face of such discourses. To present lesbian as a legitimate identity not only challenges government guidelines but risks positioning the single-sex school itself as deviant in wider discourses that desire to preserve heterosexuality (and hegemonic male positions within this discourse) as the norm.

Girls' performances often centre on issues of 'what we are not.' When they discuss such issues with me I am aware that their voices do not tell me 'how things are.' Nor does it show me 'what they are.' Their voices indicate which identities they do not want to adopt, cannot adopt or are anxious about adopting at any particular time. These constructed performances are played out in the light of influences from all aspects of their social lives. As a result it must be stressed that their voices here are a snapshot of the process of constructing gender identities. There is nothing final or certain about this process and I have been keen to constantly stress this complexity whilst acknowledging the importance of making it visible.

Making the construction of gender visible allows an analysis of the way that the single-sex school can reproduce some traditional discourses that seek to promote 'acceptable' femininities as 'natural.' My research suggests that knowledges underpinning school practices impact upon the construction of gender identities whilst being presented as common-sense or in the girls' interest. Uniform, a mechanism of control, is not about expectations of what girls should be or a way of limiting a dangerous sexuality but is presented as a way of freeing them from having to think about dress and preventing (non-academic) competition. Assembly is presented as a time to reflect rather than as a mechanism for the dissemination of knowledges or a mechanism to ensure a docile body. The dominance of Christianity in assemblies is presented as 'school tradition.' Indeed the school appears to treat both race and religion as unproblematic issues at times and the girls hint at a recognition of the diversities that are not always visible in school practices. Bourdieu's concept of institutions that are both structuring and themselves structured can be seen in the way that girls were grappling with issues of power/knowledge. Whilst they often did conform and internalise

'acceptable' ways of doing gender, they often resisted such practices and were able to recognise and challenge the school's view of how they should be doing gender.

It is possible to overplay the possible academic success of this single-sex school and to focus too heavily upon what happens within this field of experience. My findings are situated within wider fields and gender identities constructed within the school are not unconnected from these wider fields and the conflicting notions of success. The success of these single-sex schoolgirls in the longer term is unknown. Certainly some types of capital, such as the privileging of academic achievement, are to the forefront of their understandings of what are acceptable identities within the school. Such identities are empowering and open up a wide range of potential career and life routes. Girls also seem to be benefiting from engaging with issues surrounding gender identities, femininities and sexualities within a space that is pro-feminist. They expect to succeed and to be supported in achieving success. Yet the way that the pro-feminist ethos is communicated is not always clear. At times the 'othering' of the male identity in order to celebrate the feminine dangerously reinforces an oversimplistic notion of what it means to be a boy and, therefore, of what it is to be a girl.

### **What further questions have emerged?**

A key question is whether the gender identities girls construct within the single-sex school will enable them to construct powerful identities in other fields. Whether the successful high attaining identities that are produced within this school will be transferable to fields outside the school is not possible to assess given the scope of this study. Indeed, the fluency of power relations across fields, evidenced by some of their experiences on the high street or in the face of gendered understandings of what it means to be a single-sex schoolgirl in spaces outside the school, suggests that particular identities are risky and a powerful identity is never assured. Success in one field can be contested by agents in another field.



Butler's notion of performativity suggests that the dilemmas of identities are always in a state of flux (Butler; 1990). Interviewing these same girls in a year or five years time may yield very different outcomes. My data has uncovered aspects of their identities at a place in time but identities are works in progress, and constantly shifting. However, understanding some of the processes, some of the risks, some of the dilemmas of the construction of identities within single-sex institutions may be of benefit in aiding girls to negotiate their identities free from anxiety and fear. I would expect these girls to have retained strong friendships, had successful lives and to recognise the space to construct powerful identities that the single-sex school offered if I interviewed them in fifteen/twenty years time. Such a longitudinal study would illuminate the school's role as an influence on gendered identities still further. It would also allow a Bourdieuan analysis of the fluidity of identities. What happens to these girls within different fields where different types of capital are at stake?

My own identity was an important consideration throughout the research. I was always concerned about the effects that various aspects of my identity would have upon the girls and their stories. I was often aware of the ethical dilemma surrounding my identity as a male teacher and researcher of girls' experiences. It would be interesting and revealing to compare the findings of similar research within the school carried out by a female teacher. A female teacher may find that tensions between teacher and researcher identities are similarly problematic but there is a possibility of more flexibility in discussing some issues of sexuality and femininity that girls may have felt uncomfortable discussing with a male researcher.

This case study focuses on what the girls have to say about how they construct their identities. In following this line of enquiry other equally important and valid lines had to be left unexplored. Some research has focused on the role of teacher expectancy in influencing the construction of gendered identities (Jones & Myhill, 2004a; 2004b; Nash, 1976). This may be worth further investigation within the school. Some of the data indicated an expected way of being and a femininity/sexuality that required policing and control. The voices of some teachers emerged strongly in students'

testimonies and the way in which student-teacher interactions influence the construction of identities is perhaps a fruitful focus for further research. Kehily examines the language that teachers adopt in their interactions with students and the role this plays in legitimising certain cultures and setting boundaries within which identities are constructed (Kehily, 2002). An examination of teachers' role in the maintenance/resistance of traditional gendered positionings would be compatible with a Bourdieuan approach and open up further debates about the ways in which individual agency influences and is influenced by the structured structure of the single-sex school.

In recent years there has been a lack of interest in the education of girls, particularly middle class girls (Walkerdine et al, 2001). Where girls have been studied it has often been to argue that more attention should be focused on boys. This is clearly inadequate and further examination of girls' identities is required. The seductiveness of the simplicity of the binary opposition implied in the terms boy/girl fails in an attempt to define the range of diversity and differentiation within each gender group (Reay, 2001b) yet girls are often seen as being unproblematic in research literature. Research needs to refocus on the issues of girls' identities.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the girls' voices was the pro-school ethos, particularly with regard to academic performance, that underscored much of their discussions. This ethos has been noted in other single-sex schools (Bryk et al, 1993). Further qualitative analysis would be useful to examine the roots of this positive ethos including examinations of single-sex schools where it is less evident. My own research began more quantitatively attempting to compare girls with boys and mixed-schools with single-sex schools. Such an ethos would have been much harder to discern with such a research design. Obviously as this study concentrates on middle-class girls within an independent school and the 'you can do anything' ethos is heavily middle-class, dependent on choice, free will and the work ethic (Kenway & Willis, 1998). It would possibly be revealing to compare these girls' voices to those from a different type of school.



**What is the relevance of what I have done and how might it affect the practice of others?**

My study aimed to ensure the prominence of the voices of the girls themselves. These voices reveal that there is a great deal going on within the single-sex school, a complexity and an active engagement with the dilemmas facing them. The 'voices' of the school in the form of the prospectus, the head and the teachers also show that there is a broad range of dilemmas. Researchers have called for more girls' studies on what is actually happening (Arnot et al, 1998; Arnot, 2002). My study contributes to ensuring that girls' voices are not lost in the 'din of anxiety' (Mahony, 1985) over boys' underachievement.

There are some explicit implications of the findings for practice in the school. The unintended effects of some school practices need to be clarified and their policy implications made explicit. Assemblies often contained ambiguous messages. The messages beneath what was being said were often unexplored, treated as unproblematic or dealt with superficially. The PSHE resources that formed the basis of a number of gender assemblies should also be examined in a similar manner. It may be that the tutors who teach gender in PSHE lessons (who are usually non-specialists in this area) require greater support in preparing and delivering this strand of the PSHE curriculum. Certainly, teachers may benefit from some gender awareness discussion and debate. Issues such as the narrowness of what it is to be a boy, evidenced by several performances in assemblies, would be problematic were they performed in a mixed school. Such performances seem to unproblematically reinforce socially constructed notions of an 'essential' and biologically fixed gender divide. At the very least, a greater engagement with such issues may lead to a more coherent feminist message across the school and there may be an opportunity to allow girls' voices to be part of this debate.

Femininities and masculinities research has been useful in showing the range of identities inherent in terms such as girl/boy. However the danger is that we simply set up new essentialisms and I have tried to show the complexities, the overlaps, and the fluidity in feminine identities that exist

within this single-sex school. The Bourdieuan framework showed that the gendered identities constructed in this school are subjective and do not result in stereotypical polite, hard-working middle class girls. Different girls negotiated identities in different ways but being vultures did not exclude behaviours that were apparent in less 'cool' groups such as working hard and gaining places at well-respected, academic universities. Similarly, some of the 'sad' students wore make-up and went out drinking. Whilst these groups had distinct 'out-of-school' identities apparent to other girls, their performances were often similar in some areas 'in-school.' The convergence of the diversity into a positive academic ethos requires an acknowledgement that something is happening in this school beyond what can be explained by class, prior achievement or other such variables.

The focus on girls and their voices has uncovered a depth of thinking and engagement with the gendered constructions that are embedded in their everyday lives. Girls recognised and resisted some of the structuring discourse with which they did not want to be identified, whilst recognising and accepting other discourses that could offer them capital and power. The single-sex school did offer girls the possibility of constructing gender identities that were powerful. The phrase 'bunnies with steel tails', that some girls had internalised as a potential feminist identity, is not without contradiction and complexity. The feminine bunny image is hardly a radical feminist position but it is coupled with a steel tail that is required to resist and challenge wider societal conceptions of women. The phrase seems to reflect an attempt to construct an identity that blends femininity/masculinity emphasizing the potential for girls to succeed whilst stressing that these middle-class girls can adopt a wide range of identities. The aim of the phrase seems to be that girls should feel able to perform feminine and masculine repertoires in developing gender identities. Butler argues that:

'the deed is everything....There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results' (Butler, 1990; p.25).

Providing girls with the tools to perform powerful gender positions and deconstruct gender dualisms is crucial (Francis, 1999). The need for a 'steel



tail' suggests a recognition of the challenges constructing such identities presents. Examining ways in which the single-sex school can help or hinder this process through the 'production' of 'bunnies with steel tails' is an important pro-feminist justification for further research.

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**Appendix 1**

**Confidential Questionnaire**

*This questionnaire is confidential and will only be used by Mr Moore. Unfortunately names are needed to relate the information to other information held by the school i.e. CAT scores, GCSE results etc. No names will be used in any subsequent analysis. Feel free to leave any sections you do not want to complete.*

**Background details**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Ethnic origin *(Please describe your ethnic origin by ticking one of the following)*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi       | <input type="checkbox"/> Indian           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black - African   | <input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black – Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> White - European |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black - Other     | <input type="checkbox"/> White - Other    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese           | <input type="checkbox"/> Asian - Other    |

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. Occupation of parents/guardians (please be as specific as you can)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Number of brothers and/or sisters with their ages.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What is expected of you in terms of long term goals i.e. career, university etc.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Educational background**

1. Where did you go to primary school (to age 11) \_\_\_\_\_

2. If you attended a secondary school other than NHEHS, please give the name of school and the dates here

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Please list your AS subjects in order of preference – best first?*(Upper sixth circle the subject you have given up)*

1. \_\_\_\_\_2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_4. \_\_\_\_\_

4. What are your future plans after A-levels (i.e. what university, what career, what ambitions)? If you are considering a number of options put them all down here.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**General views about school experience (Adapted from Dale 1969)**  
*(Please circle the most appropriate response but feel free to add a comment beside each question or on the blank final page)*

1. Taking all the subjects together how much do you enjoy your school work?  
Greatly enjoy      Enjoy      No strong feelings      Dislike      Greatly dislike

2. I look forward to coming to school each day?  
Strongly agree      Agree      Doubtful      Disagree      Disagree strongly

3. Do you find other students, in general,  
Very friendly      Friendly      Indifferent      Unfriendly      Very unfriendly

4. What is your impression of the atmosphere of the school?  
Very pleasant      Pleasant      Neutral      Rather unpleasant      Very unpleasant

5. How would you best sum up your life at school  
Happy      Fairly happy      Neutral      Fairly unhappy      Very unhappy

6. Within your form group do you like...  
All the girls      Many girls      Only a few girls      Only one girl      None of the girls

7. In general my teachers are the sort of people I would like to be when I am grown up.  
Strongly agree      Agree      Doubtful      Disagree      Disagree strongly

8. Lessons are usually made more enjoyable because teachers and pupils share a joke.  
Strongly agree      Agree      Doubtful      Disagree      Disagree strongly

Which of the following words fits school life? *(circle the most appropriate)*

9. Lively/ Dull/ Neither

10. Variety/ Monotony/ Neither

11. Kindness/ Unpleasantness/ Neither



12. Friendly individuals/ cliques or gangs/ Neither
13. Who would you say is a good role model for you within this school or connected with your learning? *(This may be an ex student, teacher, fellow student, parent etc)*

**About your lessons** *(try to be as detailed as you can)*

1. Is there a vast difference between subjects in what you are expected to do in lessons? If the answer is no explain what you do in a typical lesson, if yes explain the differences between subjects.
2. Are your memories of primary school positive? Did you enjoy school more when you were younger? Do you enjoy school more now?
3. If you could change the way this school is organised or run, what would you do?
4. If you were studying this school what do you think would be worthy of note?
5. Lastly, would you be happy to discuss your school experience in a small group? *(This would take place either within lunchbreak or before/after school for about an hour, groups of three or four students)*

**YES/NO** *(Delete as appropriate)*

*This information may be used in the future in a related academic study. Confidentiality will be upheld in all instances and you will not be approached for unrelated information at any time in the future. Please tick this box if you do not want information to be used in future academic study.*

## **Note on the use of data**

I intend to briefly outline the reasoning behind the decisions to omit some of the data from the study. Obviously in all cases there is an element of the practical issue of remaining within the word limit for this study but other reasons were also behind this decision. Crucially, the interview data went further than these other methods so my decision was to focus on the data from the interviews. This meant that there was less space for other data. However the collection of the full range of data was an important part of the process of my research journey.

### **Quantitative information**

The lack of use of quantitative data is in some ways related to the journey from an unproblematic view of gender to the need to focus on issues of identity which could only really be revealed and analysed by listening to the voices of the girls. This journey is a key part of the main text.

However there were also other issues behind my decision not to utilise this material. I was uncomfortable with the process of putting people into rigid and fixed categories in order to analyse group differences in behaviour or achievement. This seemed to jar with my approach of seeing identities as problematic. Initially the school held no data on ethnicity and has since remedied this issue for all those entering the school. The cohorts who were the focus of my study were not monitored for ethnicity and I would have had to follow the process of categorisation regarding ethnicity. This would have been time-consuming and I was struck by the variations of the girls even when a simplistic view of race or ethnicity may have placed two girls in the same ethnic category.

Examination data was also unrevealing and showed a reasonably uniform pattern of high achievement. Even with the crude categorisation process employed and from analysis of girls from different friendship groups, there seemed to be no real difference in achievement. Girls leave school with excellent examination results and go to good universities. When they do not it is not as simplistic as can be highlighted through the comparison of any one group to another.



Some girls from supposedly 'sad' groups (a term used by the girls themselves) achieved less well than some girls from 'cool' groups and there appeared to be no pattern across ethnic, religious or social groups generally. I believe quantitative data can be useful to pro-feminist research but its usefulness in this case study was very limited.

### **Lesson observations**

In lessons there was an element of triangulation as I could observe the pro-school ethos that many girls alluded to explicitly. This lay beneath much of what they said about the school. However, as my focus was not about some of the issues that lesson observation could have revealed, such as the teachers' behaviour/expectations or the language in the classroom, it became much less central. Of course, some interesting material was discarded but a central aim was to let the girls voices describe their experience and where there may have been an opportunity to use some of the lesson observation data this may have been at the expense of their own descriptions of their experience. I accept that lesson observation may have enabled an exploration of issues of teacher expectancy on student behaviour that was not focused on but the stringent word limit prevented this issue from being explored.

### **Teacher and other interviews**

Obviously a great deal of data was amassed and there had to be some narrowing of the focus. Teacher expectancy effects on gender identities were one possible line of enquiry and some interviews referred to this issue but as the students data was so rich, and as the study was about the ways in which they articulated their dilemmas, teacher interviews were less central to the study. In both teacher and student interviews I gave a list of questions yet many of these questions were well beyond what the students might have fully understood. The reason for this was that I wanted them to see my direction and understandings as clearly as possible. In some interviews we spent a good deal of time discussing what I was doing and my emergent understandings of their

school experience. I felt that my openness and lack of condescension with the potential interview questions had an ethical element as well as opening up discussions.

### **Field diary**

Some information from my ongoing field notes remains in the study but a great deal of data was omitted for a number of reasons. Firstly some of the directions followed in interviews were dictated by the understandings of the school that I built up through reflecting on incidents recorded in the diary.



## **Student Interviews**

**Thank you for agreeing to discuss gender issues in groups. In simple terms my case study is about our school and I am most interested in gender identities.**

***The following questions are just a guide - to discuss them all fully would take weeks***

### **Items you could discuss that would be interesting**

**What do you feel are the benefits of the schools single sex environment?**

**At what point do the benefits of a single sex environment cease to be beneficial?**

**What are the negatives?**

**What is different about the school because it is single sex? Do you think all boys schools have similar characteristics?**

**Can you compare with other schools - how is it different to primary etc?**

**What do you think other people think of all girls schools? What do you think is expected of you being at an all girls school? Are there conflicts between various different perspectives held by different groups?**

**Does gender discrimination still exist, in your opinion, and how relevant is this issue to your experience? Where is it most apparent?**

**Do you think being in a single sex environment makes a difference to a persons future gender relationships in careers and personal lives?**

**Do you think that your behaviour and achievements will have been different because you are at a single sex school?**

**What else do you think affects your behaviour and achievement?**

**Language and gender - does your experience suggest language is an important factor in identity formation?**

**Culture - how does popular culture impact on school, the home, your wider experience?**

**What do you understand by your identity? How fluid is identity? What problems are encountered in establishing an identity? How easy is it to shift from one identity to another? What are the limits on the different people we can possibly be?**

**What is the most important influence on the person that you will end up being?**

Is it important to be taught by people with similar identities?

Is it important for you to see women succeeding? Who have you seen succeeding (in any field) who you have admired and wanted to be like (male or female)

What experiences have led you to believe the things that you believe?

How is the identity formed? How important a part of identity is gender?

How does a persons life experience and life history become internalised and part of their identity? Is there a difference between things that happen to you and the things you are? Is there a difference between the person you are and the things you do?

Have you ever felt 'pigeonholed'? (made out to be someone you are not) How would you (or did you) resolve this?

Deterministic accounts of gender and schooling stress reproduction of women's subordinate position. How does our school combat this? How do your families address this issue.

Bourdieu terms people who are not trained/prepared to succeed at school 'fish out of water'. What do you think he means by this and how far do you think our school could have this effect on students.

*Again, I would like to stress the anonymity aspect. You will not be identified in my case study but the interviews will give my descriptions of the school a wider perspective and make them more vivid. I will give you a copy of my transcript if you want and if you would like to discuss how I interpret it I am happy to try to explain.*



## Teacher Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. In general terms my case study is about our school and is partly based on the work of Bourdieu who talks about cultural capital and 'playing the game' in various scenarios. I am most interested in identity formation and the dialectic between the objective structures we all operate within and individuals' subjective responses to those structures.

*The following questions are just a guide to give an idea about some of the issues I am looking at. We can talk about whichever of the following you feel happy to comment on.*

### Possible items for discussion that would be interesting

What do you feel are the benefits of the schools single sex environment?

At what point, if any, do the benefits of a single sex environment cease to be beneficial?

What are the negatives?

What is different about the school because it is single sex? Do you think all boys schools have similar characteristics?

Can you compare with other schools - how is it different to mixed schools or non independent schools or schools elsewhere in the country?

What do you think other people think of all girls schools? What do you think is expected of students at an all girls school? Are there conflicts between various different perspectives held by different groups? Are people aware of what our school is like? Do they hold accurate perceptions of our school?

How effectively does the school operate in terms of reducing gender discrimination and in ensuring students are aware of, and achieve, their potential ?

Do you think being in a single sex environment makes a difference to a persons future gender relationships in careers and personal lives?

Do you think that student's behaviour and achievements will have been different because they are at a single sex school?

What else do you think affects our student's behaviour and achievement other than the structure of their school?

Language and gender - does your experience suggest language is an important factor in identity formation?

Culture - how does popular culture impact on school, the home, students wider experience?

What do you understand by identity? How fluid is identity? What problems are encountered in establishing an identity? How easy is it to shift from one identity to another? What are the limits on the different people we can possibly be or students can possibly be?

Is it important for students at this school to be taught by people with similar identities?

Is it important for students to see women succeeding? Is this a significant part of the ethos of our school?

How is the identity formed? How important a part of identity is gender? How important is our school in contributing to the gender identity of our students?

How does a person's life experience and life history become internalised and part of their identity? Is there a difference between things that happen to you and the things you are? Is there a difference between the person you are and the things you do?

Deterministic accounts of gender and schooling stress reproduction of women's subordinate position. Does our school combat this? If so, how? If not, should it? Do you think students' families address this issue?

Bourdieu terms people who are not trained/prepared to succeed at school 'fish out of water'. How far do you think our school could have/does have this effect on students?

*Again, I would like to stress the anonymity aspect. You will not be identified in my case study but the interviews will give my descriptions of the school a wider perspective and make them more vivid. I will give you a copy of my transcript if you want and if you would like to discuss how I interpret it I would be happy to do this.*



# Context of Data Used

2002 Cohort	2003 Cohort	2004 Cohort	2005 Cohort
STAGE ONE		STAGE TWO	
Amina – <i>1hr ten minutes (Dec 2001)</i> Zoe Gabrielle  Pia ( <i>Dec 2001</i> ) Debbie – <i>20 minutes</i> <i>Interviewed with another pupil – not quoted</i>	Natasha - <i>45 minutes (Nov 2001)</i> Prashianthy Stephanie Jamini  Annie – <i>1 hour (Jan 2002)</i> Elizabeth Corina  Head of years interview ( <i>July 2002</i> ) Rose & Suzanne – <i>40-minute interview then a follow up 30-minute interview.</i>	<i>Interviewed this group three times (3x1 hour approx) – Saskia only present at one interview (Jan/Feb 2003)</i> Katie Jenny Sarah Claudia Niamh Saskia  Niruja – <i>short interview 15 minutes (had been interviewed within a bigger group initially) (May 2003)</i>  <i>Record of their own discussion (June 2003/ Sept 2003)</i> Jenny - <i>30 minutes approx (x2)</i> Niamh Katie Claudia Saskia  Claudia – <i>30 minutes</i> (Oct 2003) Niamh Sarah Jenny  Head teacher interviewed – <i>45 minutes (March 2003)</i>	Stella – <i>1hr ten minutes (April 2004)</i> Svetlana Emily  Svetlana – <i>40 minutes (May 2004)</i> Rachel Theresa Hannah  Svetlana – <i>45 minutes</i> (May 2004) Hannah Theresa Jo  Emily – <i>Interview 40 minutes (June 2004)</i>  Gemma – <i>short 15 minutes (June 2004)</i> Cecelia  Discussion with small class of RS group when this cohort were year 11 age – <i>40 minutes discussion (June 2003)</i>  Analysis of Prospectus

Ongoing items – Reflexive diary/ Attendance and observation of assemblies & meetings/ Notes from meeting outside school i.e. History GCSE feedback

NB – Cohort 2002/3 interviews used as part of stage 1 analysis. Subsequent interviews were completed during stage two.

### Other points about context

*Interviews generally took place in unused classrooms but one of the stage two interviews (the Katie, Jenny, Sarah, Claudia, Niamh and Saskia group) took place on a coach during a school trip. They also recorded their own discussions in their sixth form common room.*

*Other interviews that took place during stage two were discarded due to their lack of depth compared to the key groups who are interviewed here.*

*The depth of the discussions presented here was aided by the general debates I engaged in with other teachers and students about my findings and my thinking. All participants received a copy of transcripts and often they were keen to engage in follow up discussions. Although not transcribed or recorded on this table due to their ad hoc and informal nature, some of these discussions were substantial and were influential in refining my thinking about the key points of interviews and the essential points that teachers or students had been making.*

*Groups were flexible due to the practicalities of life within a busy school but on the whole students were interviewed with close friends.*

*I had taught many of these students and enjoyed a positive working relationship with them prior to these interviews and this greatly facilitated the willingness with which they discussed issues so openly.*

*All names have been changed and the groups interviewed do reflect some of the diversity within the school but it is difficult to categorise even this small number of students. As soon as we discussed their ethnicity or religion it was clear that their experiences should not be categorised because they are so varied. I have chosen names that reflect some of their ethnic identities and referred to these identities as it was appropriate in the main text.*